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THE CORSAIR PLANTER; or, Driven to Doom.

A Tragical Tale of Southern Shores and Waters and Companion Romance to "The Skeleton Schooner," and "Buccaneer Bess."

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"BACK! TURN BACK! FOR I WILL SAVE HIM OR DIE WITH HIM!"

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CHAPTER I.

THE BLACK CREW.

NIGHT has fallen upon the earth, and its sable veil shuts out land and sea from view, though a few stars are twinkling brightly like beacon-lights set in the Heavens.

A balmy breeze is blowing off the shore, and bears with it the scent of innumerable flowers.

The great bosom of the Mexican Gulf heaves like unto that of a human being, and the waves give forth a low murmur as they roll upon the beach.

Gulfward, all is darkness, but landward the scene is one of repose and beauty, for along the coast here and there are the white villas of wealthy planters, surrounded with orange-groves and flowers, and from the windows glimmer lights, as though beckoning one to the comfort within the spacious halls.

Pacing to and fro upon a long pier, projecting out from the shore in front of one of these plantation homes, is a man.

He is tall, erect, and has the firm tread of one who walks the quarter-deck of a vessel of war.

His hands are clasped behind his back, and, as he reaches the end of the pier, he halts in front of a small and pretty pavilion built there, and gazes out over the waters.

Not upon the half dozen pretty craft at anchor in the little land-locked harbor does his eye fall, as they gracefully rise on the waves rolling shoreward; but they pierce further into the darkness and rest upon a bright light visible far off upon the waters, and fully two leagues away.

And suddenly, as he gazes, there is visible a bright flash, followed a moment after by the deep boom of a gun that rolls in thunder tones over the waters.

"Hal! it is a shot from an armed vessel."

"But what has she fired it for?" he said aloud.

And then once more came a flash and report, followed immediately by other deep-mouthed notes.

"It is a sea-combat, for now I behold a second craft."

Now he was all attention, and stood with eager eyes gazing upon the distant flashes, which illumined the decks and rigging of two vessels battling for the mastery.

In the two villas on the shore other lights now gleamed, as in also the numerous cabins of the negroes, situated in the rear of the mansions, and against the dark background of the magnolia forests.

For miles along the coast those brazen notes had been heard, and all looked out upon the dark waters, wondering, shuddering at the scene, and waiting.

"It can but be an American cruiser in these waters, and who can be its foe but a pirate?"

"I will to its aid, for I may render good service," cried the man upon the pier, and turning his face landward he placed his hands to his mouth, to serve as a trumpet, and shouted in thrilling tones:

"Ho! ho! the crew of the Jack-o'-lantern ahoy!"

"All hands ahoy!"

His voice rung like a trumpet, reached the ears of a large group of negroes standing in front of their quarters, and in deep tones came back the answer:

"Ay, ay, master, we is coming!"

Then was heard a chorus of voices, running feet, and a few moments after there broke upon the pier a flying mass of sable humanity that made the boards rattle.

"Into the boats, boys, and pull for the yacht!" was the ringing order of the master, as he sprang into a skiff, and instantly almost, half a dozen boats shot out from the pier toward a graceful sloop lying at anchor a cable's length away.

Reaching the yacht the master gave his orders quickly.

"Up with all of her canvas, boys! Slip her cable there!"

"Cast those boats adrift!"

"There, she feels the breeze, and flies along as though she was anxious for the fray."

And over the dark waters glided the beautiful yacht, her master at her helm and his sable crew, full two score in number, in their white cotton suits, looking like ghosts manning a phantom craft, for the trim-built vessel was

painted white, and spread clouds of snowy sails above her decks!

Once he had cleared the entrance to the little basin, which served as a harborage, the commander of the yacht called to two of his slaves, for such they were, and said:

"Caleb, I want you to go below with Dot and bring on deck all the cutlasses and pistols necessary to arm the men, for I believe yonder vessels are an American cruiser and a pirate, and I intend to help the former, if there be need."

"Yas, master, we is willin', sah, an' I thought yer wanted suthin' o' that kind, an' that is why I told so many o' ther boys, 'sides the crew o' the Jack-o'-lantern, to cruise along," answered Caleb.

"You were right, and I am glad you did, Caleb, for the fifteen who belong to the yacht would hardly have been enough."

"Now arm the boys!"

This was quickly done, and the master, still at the helm, was heading directly for the battling vessels, and running with the wind free on his quarter at a pace that would soon bring him within hail.

The two vessels had in the meantime kept up a rapid fire, as they glided along the coast, one from its bow, the other from its stern guns, and suddenly the craft that was flying luffed up, as it rounded a headland, and sent a savage broadside upon its pursuer.

"By Heaven! see them!"

The cry broke from the yachtsman, and relinquishing his grasp on the wheel to Caleb, he raised his glass to his eyes.

"Ther chaser done been hit hard, master," said Caleb.

"Yes; that broadside cut away her bowsprit and her topmasts, and she has been hurt badly, for see, she has come to, and her foe is putting back to board."

"Hal! there goes another broadside, and by the Goddess of the Seas! the craft is the *Red Rover*!"

"Stand ready, my brave boys, for they need us there!"

And still watching, as the yacht neared the scene, those on her decks saw the vessel that had been flying, until her well directed broadside was hurled upon her pursuer, pour in a rapid fire, luff suddenly, and run alongside of the crippled adversary.

Then strange looking forms were seen flying over her bulwarks, shouts, shrieks, groans, pistol-shots and the clash of steel were heard, and a hand to hand fight had begun for mastery.

Upon the yacht now all were silent, and the master had again taken the helm, and straight for the two grapnel-locked vessels he headed.

Nearer and nearer she drew, unseen by the struggling combatants of either vessel, and then gliding past, within her length, was luffed up sharp, and laid alongside with a skill and nerve that proved that a thorough sailor held her helm.

"Follow me!"

The order was low and stern, and over the decks poured the black crew, following their master.

In one hand their leader carried a cutlass, in the other a pistol, and more of the latter were in his belt.

Attacking the pirates in the rear, and who were shouting with triumph, believing the victory their own, they took them wholly by surprise, and many were cut down before they understood who were their foes and from whence they had come.

And just in time had the master and his black crew come, for he found that those who needed his aid was Captain Bess, the woman avenger of wrongs done her by the dreaded pirate known as Forrester, the Freebooter.

Boldly had she hunted for his vessel, and finding it, had daringly attacked it.

But the pirate's heavier guns and larger crew had crippled her vessel and her men, and the end would have been total defeat and her capture by an unmerciful foe, had not the planter yachtsman, Percy Wyndham, and his black crew, arrived in time to turn the tide in her favor.

CHAPTER II.

THE PIRATE HUNTRESS.

As the Jack-o'-Lantern struck the side of the pirate hunting craft *Lioness*, Captain Bess had been driven to her quarter-deck, and there made a last stand.

Cutting his way toward her was Forrester the Freebooter, the dreaded chief, and firing full in his face he had fallen, and a shout of joy burst from her lips, for be her fate what it might, she felt that she had avenged the wrongs she had suffered at his hands.

But suddenly another leader had sprung forward and confronted her, and one who made her shrink back at sight of him, for little had she expected to find him upon a pirate deck.

"Oh, Heaven! you here, Mark Mortimer?" she cried, starting back.

"Ay, sweet Bessie, and I shall send your soul to Satan as I did your father's," was the savage rejoinder, as he made a thrust at her heart with his sword.

But before her suddenly sprung a tall form, that of her lieutenant, and he received the blade intended for her heart, and sunk upon the deck, with the cry:

"Bessie, for your sweet sake."

Then it was that the planter and his black crew rushed forward, and the man, whose appearance on the deck had so unnerved Captain Bess, saw that all was lost, for his men, attacked in the rear by the slaves were crying for quarter at the very moment of victory, or throwing themselves into the sea to escape death at the hands of the sable sailors.

"Never will I be taken to die at the yard-arm," cried the pirate lieutenant, and he placed a pistol to his head to end his life, for he saw that all was lost.

But an iron grip was upon his hand, and a hoarse voice cried:

"No, Mark Mortimer, for your sister's sake I will not let you die upon a pirate deck."

"Quick! into the cabin of my yacht, and await my coming."

"Quick! or you will be recognized."

"You saving me, Percy Wyndham?" gasped the young officer in a dazed kind of way.

"Yes, but for the sake of your sister only."

"Quick! go over the side upon my yacht, and await me there," was the stern response.

The man waited no longer, but bounded over the bulwarks to the deck of the Jack-o'-lantern, and disappeared, while the planter who had thus saved his life, and kept him from the dishonor of dying upon the deck of a corsair craft, went aft to where Captain Bessie stood, silent and seemingly half-dazed by all that had occurred.

Seeing the planter approach, she held forth her hand, and said earnestly:

"Percy Wyndham, to you I owe all."

"No, Bessie, for you made a noble fight of it; but the freebooter and his crew were devils to fight."

"And you came to my aid?"

"Yes, I saw the fight, and came to see if I could be of service; but I little dreamed I would find you, though I half thought one must be Forrester, the Freebooter, as he was reported in this neighborhood."

"I am glad I have come, and now that you have gained your revenge, I hope you will consent to give up this wild life, and return to your home yonder."

"See! your battle has been within a league of Cliff Cottage, your old home," and Percy Wyndham pointed to a woodland that jutted out from the main shore.

"Yes, a fitting place to consummate my revenge, for there it was that Forrester, the Freebooter, sought to wrong my father and myself, and yonder is the home of Mark Mortimer, who cruelly murdered my poor father."

"But did you ever expect to see Mark Mortimer upon a pirate's deck?"

"Sh, Bessie—for his sister's sake let not the truth be known, but die with him."

"Are you sure that he is dead, Percy Wyndham?" she asked eagerly.

"We can soon find out, Bessie; but Forrester the Chief is, for you shot him down and I saw him thrown overboard by two of my slaves."

"But Mark Mortimer?"

"I will have search made for his body, Bessie," was the evasive reply.

"God grant that he be dead, too."

"I fired upon him, and whether he fell or not, I do not know, for I was so dazed at seeing him on the schooner, I hardly know what occurred," and the woman passed her hand across her brow as though she yet was hardly conscious of all that occurred.

To rouse her, the Planter said:

"Bessie, now look to your wounded, for here is one of your officers, who is evidently in need of aid," and Percy Wyndham pointed to the form of the young officer who had received the blade of Mark Mortimer in his body, thus saving Captain Bessie.

Thus recalled to herself, she knelt beside him, and said softly:

"Thank God! Raoul Langdon, you still live, and I shall nurse you back to full strength once more."

"Do not speak, for this night my revenge is satiated, and I will take you to my long deserted home, off which we now lie, and Binnacle Ben shall go with us, and you shall not die, for did you not receive your wound to save me?"

She spoke as softly as a mother to a child, and the wounded man smiled faintly.

With him to think of now, and believing that the two bitter foes she had long sought had been slain, Captain Bessie at once became the woman again, and had the wounded officer borne into the cabin of her vessel and tenderly dressed his wound, after sending her boatswain, Binnacle Ben, to ask the planter to take charge of the vessels.

This Percy Wyndham had already done, and quickly he had order out of chaos, for the wounded pirates and pirate-hunters were at once sent below decks and taken care of, the dead men thrown overboard, and the crew of Captain Bessie's vessel, with his slaves, were set to work repairing the crippled craft.

Percy Wyndham had just given orders to rig

another bowsprit and fore-topmast, in place of those shot away, when Binnacle Ben, a rough-mannered but kind-hearted old tar, came to him and said:

"Cap'n, I'm told to say that Cap'n Bess would like to see you in her cabin, sir."

"I will come at once," returned Percy Wyndham, and, by the time Binnacle Ben had delivered his response, he entered the cabin and stood before the woman who had won the name of Pirate Huntress, in hunting down Forrester, the Freebooter, and his outlaw craft.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE DEN OF THE LIONESSE.

THE cabin lamp shone brightly, as Percy Wyndham entered, what Captain Bessie facetiously called the "Den of the Lioness," and it displayed all therein distinctly.

The planter was very young, just across the threshold of manhood, and with a face full of wondrous fascination, added to dignity, and an expression that showed perfect confidence in himself.

His eyes were strangely expressive, though shaded with sadness, and his mouth full of resolution and stern beyond expectation in one so young.

His form was erect, full of strength and his every movement graceful, while his suit of white flannel and Panama hat gave him a free-and-easy appearance.

About his waist was buckled a belt, containing several awkward looking silver-mounted pistols of that age, and his gold-hilted cutlass hung to a chain at his side, and that it had done good service was proven by the red stain upon the left leg against which it dangled.

Upon a lounge in the "den" lay at full length Raoul Langdon, the young officer, who had saved Captain Bessie's life at the risk of his own.

A Frenchman, the surgeon of the Lioness was bending over him, having dressed his wound, and Binnacle Ben, the old tar, stood near.

The "Lioness of the Sea," as Captain Bess was called, arose to greet the young planter.

Her face was very pale, and yet strikingly beautiful, but marred by the stern look of resolve that haunted it.

She was young, not more than twenty perhaps, and her form, clad in an elegant uniform *a la Mexican* was simply superb in every outline.

Her belt of arms she had cast aside, as also the gold-embroidered sombrero she had worn, and her haughty head was fully exposed with its wavy masses of hair.

"Mr. Wyndham, I have sent for you to deliver into your hands my vessel the Lioness, and the schooner of Forrester the Freebooter," she said softly, as she advanced to meet the young planter.

"In any way that I can serve you, Bessie, pray command me," he answered pleasantly.

"You can serve me, for Forrester would have been my victor, had you not come when you did, so I owe all to you."

"You know me as I am, Percy Wyndham, and that I love not the wild life I have led, but entered upon it to avenge wrongs against both my father and myself."

"I am called Buccaneer Bess, because I sailed under no nation's flag; but I hold here the commission of the Governor-Commandante at New Orleans, to go and hunt Forrester, the Skimmer of the Seas."

"I did hope to bring his neck to the noose, and then I intended to seek one other, the one who killed my father, after all the sorrow he caused me, and bring him to a merited doom."

"You know the result, for Forrester I shot down, and his body was thrown into the sea, and upon his deck I found that other whom I sought, and he too, it is said, was slain, and his body given to the fishes for food."

"For your sake, for her sake, I will keep his end on a pirate deck a secret."

"But now, having finished the work of revenge I had sworn to accomplish, my mission is complete, my cruise is ended, and I return to Cliff Cottage, my old home."

"Thither I bear with me this officer, who saved my life, and it shall be my duty to nurse him back to life and health once more, and Binnacle Ben here will accompany me, while to you I surrender the vessels, with the request that you take them to New Orleans and surrender them to the authorities."

"I will gladly do so, Bessie, and your gallant service shall receive full credit," frankly said Percy Wyndham.

"I know you will do all you can for me, Mr. Wyndham, and now I ask that you send a boat ashore with me and my friends here."

"Let me suggest a better plan, Bessie, for my yacht lies alongside, and I can transfer you to her, and Caleb will run you in to Cliff Cottage, and go ashore with his crew to set all in readiness for you."

"I thank you sincerely," returned Captain Bessie; and then, after asking the planter to see that her crew received their share of prize money for the capture of the pirate vessel, preparations were commenced for the removal of the wounded man to the yacht.

Ascending to the schooner's deck, Percy Wyndham was in a quandary, for there was one in the cabin of his vessel whom Captain Bessie believed to be dead.

That one was Mark Mortimer, between whose family and his own a cruel *vendetta* existed, and whose home was near his own on the shore.

Had he so wished, he could have had against his enemy a cruel revenge, in thus finding him upon the deck of the Skimmer of the Sea, and fighting as one of Forrester, the Freebooter's, officers.

But there were reasons why Percy Wyndham might not revenge against him, and more, was anxious rather to save him, and these reasons this romance will develop.

To get the Corsair Planter out of the yacht to the deck of the Lioness, unseen and unrecognized, was what taxed Percy Wyndham sorely.

Did Captain Bessie see him, or know that he was alive, the planter knew she would, in her mad thirst for revenge, take his life.

Did the crew of the Lioness, or his own slaves, see him, the secret of his having turned pirate would at once be known, and all this Percy Wyndham wished to avoid.

To accomplish his object, he ordered the crew of the Lioness to muster aft, and then he sprang over upon the deck of the yacht.

Entering the cabin of his little office, he found seated there, his face buried in his hand and the picture of despair, Mark Mortimer.

"Here, Mr. Mortimer, throw this cloak about you, and put on this soft hat and follow me," he said coldly.

The man looked up quickly, and his face was white and haggard. But it was withal a handsome face, stamped with dissipation and a certain irresolute look though it was.

Though nearly of the same age as Percy Wyndham, the wild life he had led caused him to look much older.

"Why should I disguise myself thus?" he asked haughtily, rising to his feet.

"Because I do not care to have you recognized by my slaves, or those of the crew of the Lioness, who may know you."

"And Bessie Gito?"

"Is on her vessel; but I send her ashore in this yacht, and she believes you to be dead."

"Come, lose no time, but follow me."

Mark Mortimer loved life, and in spite of his fearful peril and the dishonorable position in which he was placed, he was glad that he had not committed suicide, as he had intended, under the circumstances of believing that all was lost and he was but saving his neck from the gallows.

Quickly, therefore, he threw the cloak around him, drew the slouch hat down over his eyes, and followed his bitterest enemy, who was acting the part of a friend.

Reaching the deck, Percy Wyndham led the way over the bulwarks to the Lioness, and thence on to the pirate schooner.

Few observed them, and those who did thought nothing was wrong.

Into the cabin of the buccaneer craft he led him, and then said:

"Seek your state-room, and I will lock you in."

"I will go to New Orleans in this vessel, and hence you will be safe."

The humiliated man made no reply, but silently entered the very comfortable state-room, that had been his own since his going on the schooner, and Percy Wyndham turned the lock upon him, put the key in his pocket, and ascended to the deck, to find a search was being made for him, as Captain Bessie was ready to go on board the yacht.

The transfer of the wounded officer was soon made, and the yacht swung loose from the two schooners, Percy Wyndham calling out to his negro sailing-master:

"Caleb, when you have made all ship-shape at Cliff Cottage, sail to Lakelands and tell my mother what has occurred, after which come to New Orleans after me."

"Yes, master; but must I come to de Lake landin', or up de ribber, sah?"

"To the Lake harborage," was the reply, and soon after the two schooners swung apart and set sail, heading westward, with the pirate craft leading the way.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM OUT THE DEPTHS.

As the yacht from Lakelands plantation, manned by her faithful and brave black crew, sped on her course inshore, she passed close to a dark object floating upon the waters.

As the wind was off-shore, the beautiful vessel had to beat in against the six-knot breeze, and when she had passed, on the starboard tack, the object floating in the water, she at once went about to go upon the port tack.

As the order of her black sailing-master, Caleb, was given:

"Ready about!"

The dark object upon the waters suddenly disappeared; but a few seconds after it appeared again, and only a few yards distant from the yacht's stern.

Then there seemed to be a struggle going on,

as though a man was drowning within a few feet of succor, yet would not call for help, or could not; and in the foaming wake of the craft no one seemed to observe that a human being was there fighting manfully for life.

Just as the yacht bent over to the breeze, to start upon her port tack, the man's outstretched hand grasped the rudder-post, and clinging there he was dragged along through the waters.

Still no cry to them just above his head for help, and from whom he was hidden by the shelving stern of the yacht.

On sped the craft, and still clinging to her for life was the man who had caught to her rudder-post, unmindful of the waters seething about him, over him, and seemingly striving hard to drag him off to die.

With teeth hard set, eyes closed, and both hands clinging on, he held there, while the Jack-o'-Lantern made tack after tack, and at last went about to head into a small basin, sheltered by the bold headland upon which stood the cottage home of Bessie Gito, the Pirate Huntress.

As the yacht sped in between the sheltering arms of earth that formed the harborage, the man clinging beneath the stern let go his hold and sunk from sight beneath the waves.

But, ere she had glided on her length, he came again to the surface, and with slow and evidently forced strokes, struck out for the sandy beach beneath the headland.

As the craft luffed up and the plunge of her anchor was heard in the basin, the man whom she had towed ashore staggered out from the water, and tottering as he went, made his way to the shelter of the overhanging cliff, where, with a sigh of relief, he sunk down, seemingly utterly used up.

For some moments he remained so motionless, so silent, that it seemed as though life might have left his body with the sigh he gave when he sunk down upon the soft sands.

But at last he moved, and rose to a sitting posture, while he muttered:

"Well, Frank Forrester, that was the closest call death ever gave you, and had not that yacht come along just as she did, I would now have been at the bottom of the waters."

"Ha, ha! but I am not dead yet, and that fact those who sail the seas in ships shall soon know, as shall also that accursed girl, and Percy Wyndham, too."

"I bear your mark here, Bessie Gito," and he shook his clinched fist toward the yacht, "and it well-nigh cost me my life."

"But I have a head as hard as my heart, and the bullet glanced, and when they threw me overboard for dead, as they must have done, the cool waters revived me."

As he spoke he drew from his pocket a kerchief and bound it about his head, thereby covering a deep gash from the temple backward along the side of his head, where a bullet had cut its way along.

He smiled grimly then, and rising to his feet, tottered, for he was still weak from loss of blood and his tremendous exertions to preserve life.

Passing around the beach under the cliff, he stood where he could watch the movements of the yacht, and discovered that a boat's crew had already landed, and that lights were visible in the little cottage on the headland, and which had been so long vacant, while its fair mistress was skimming the seas in search of him.

For a long time he watched the movements of forms about the cottage, for the door was wide open, and the light shone brightly forth, and then he saw half a dozen men come down to the shore.

"They are Wyndham's negro crew," he muttered, recognizing the black faces and white-clad forms by the battle lantern they carried.

Then he saw them enter a boat and row out to the yacht, which at once got under way and stood out of the basin.

Then he slowly moved on around the shore gave an exclamation of seeming joy, as he discovered that the yacht had left one of her boats, and then as stealthily as an Indian on a trail, he crept toward the cottage.

Keeping in the shadow of the magnolia forest at the back of the little house, he at last gained a position from whence he felt he could make his way unobserved to the cottage.

This he at last did, and peering into the window he beheld the wounded officer of the Lioness lying upon a bed, and Binnacle Ben seated by him, while in another room he saw the form of Bessie Gito moving about as though performing household duties.

Glancing a second time at the wounded man, as Binnacle Ben had slightly changed his position, he saw a pale, handsome face, marked with intellect and courage, and wearing the impress of a noble soul.

And at that face he stared with a look of horror, while from his lips broke the words:

"Good God above! it is Raoul Langdon!"

For full a moment he did not move, his eyes still fixed upon the pale face of the man he had recognized, and then he turned away, crept back to the shadow of the forest, and from thence to the shore.

Springing into the little boat, left by Caleb, for the use of those at the cabin, he seized the

oars and pulled out of the basin, while he muttered hoarsely to himself:

"This boat is my safety, and in it I can make Mobile, and then my work of revenge shall begin, for, though without a vessel, Forrester, the Freebooter yet lives, and, Bessie Gito, Raoul Langdon and Percy Wyndham, the debts I owe you, shall be paid in full, and the haughty heiress of The Everglades, Mabel Mortimer shall yet be mine.

"Ay, wounded, alone, a fugitive though I am, I swear it!"

CHAPTER V.

A FOE'S FRIENDSHIP.

THE wind held fair around the coast for the two vessels, over which Percy Wyndham had command, and in due time they entered the Mississippi and began the struggle against the current to reach the city of New Orleans.

As soon as he had set sail from in front of his own plantation home, and that of Mark Mortimer, for, as I have said, the lands of the respective estates of Lakelands and The Everglades adjoined, he began to plot how it was best for him to aid the prisoner in the state-room of the pirate vessel.

Purposely, he had brought none of his own slaves along with him, knowing how well known Mark Mortimer was to all of them.

The pirate vessel he had manned with half of the crew from the Lioness, while the outlaws had all been placed in irons below the deck of their own vessel.

To them he knew was Mark Mortimer also known; but he had given out quietly that their chief and all his officers had been slain, so that when surrendered, to the authorities they would not expect to see the Corsair Planter, and he hoped they did not know him as he really was.

If it was discovered by the crew of the Lioness that one of the pirate lieutenants was on board, concealed by him, Percy Wyndham knew that he would have to give him up, and therefore he was placed in a most delicate position for having given his word to Mark Mortimer that he would save him, he would not break his pledge.

He therefore personally, cared for the comfort of his secret prisoner, fed him with food brought for himself, would not allow him to speak above a whisper, and kept the key of his state-room, so that the man who acted as his steward could not discover its contents.

Purposely, as they neared the city, Percy Wyndham shortened sail, that it might be late at night before they dropped anchor there, and consequently no report have to be made until morning.

Timing himself he let fall his anchor at four bells, and then, locking his cabin was rowed ashore, and going up into the town bade the coxswain await his return.

After an hour's absence he returned, and said to the seaman who was acting as an officer:

"Willis, I will hold the deck now, as it is nearly eight bells, and you can turn in."

"Thank you, sir," said the man, glad to get rest, for upon himself and the planter had devolved the whole care of the vessel, for he alone of the crew had Percy Wyndham found capable of doing an officer's duties.

The Lioness had anchored half a cable's length further up the river, and in a line with the Lioness, so that Percy Wyndham could see that all was quiet on board of her, and no curious eyes seemed to be peering about.

Then he descended to the cabin and approached the door of the state-room in which was Mark Mortimer, anxious and watchful, for he knew that the vessel had anchored off the city, and the dread thought came to him:

"What a chance for Wyndham to get his revenge against me now.

"And will he do it?"

"Mr. Mortimer!" called the planter in a low tone.

"Yes, Mr. Wyndham," was the eager response.

"I went ashore, after dropping anchor and secured you the services of a boatman.

"He will come directly under the stern of the schooner, and with oars muffled, while, as I hold the deck, he will not be challenged.

"Here is a rope, and when I stamp thrice on the deck, over your head, go to the starboard stern port, make fast your rope and lower yourself into the boat, and the man will land you on the levee, when you can go to the address upon this slip of paper, and there I will meet you at noon to-morrow.

"But, until you see me, do not venture forth, or allow any one, other than your host to see you."

"Why all this secrecy, Wyndham; if I am not to be reported by you, as having been on Forrester's vessel?" petulantly asked the Corsair Planter.

"If seen and recognized, it will come to the ears of Bessie Gito, and knowing you to be alive, she will reap her revenge, while, believing you to be dead, your secret is safe, sir."

"Pardon me, you are right.

"I will do as you say, although I know I am befriended by my bitterest foe."

"To-morrow, when I see you, will be time enough to decide for the future, Mr. Mortimer.

"Good-night, sir," and Percy Wyndham returned to the deck.

It was just midnight, and the watch was just changing, and quietly he paced the deck, until all was quiet once more.

Then he glanced down the river, for of course the vessel swung with the current, and his keen eyes detected a dark object coming slowly toward the schooner.

Nearer and nearer it approached, and he discovered that it was a boat, and held a single occupant.

The noiseless movement of the oars in the oarlocks, told him that it was the man he had engaged, and he stepped to the stern, and knocking the ashes from his cigar, turned it quickly three times in a circle, the signal agreed upon if all was well.

The boatman, who was resting upon his oars, at once moved up-stream once more and quietly came under the stern of the schooner.

Then Percy Wyndham walked to the waist among the watch, to see that the men were not observant of what was transpiring astern, and retracing his way aft, saw the boat moving rapidly down the stream, and that it held two occupants, proved to him that his plot to save his foe had been successful.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SURRENDER.

AS soon as he had breakfasted, the morning after his arrival in front of New Orleans, Percy Wyndham sought the mansion of the Governor-Commandante of the city.

He found, from the gaping crowds upon the river banks, gazing at the Lioness and her prize, that the news had already spread through the city of the capture of the famous craft of Forrester, the Freebooter, and that the noted Skimmer of the Seas had met his death upon his own pirate deck.

From the scene of the sea combat, by the lake, it was but a comparative short distance, running around and coming up the river to New Orleans, and the news had been reported by numerous fishermen and coasters some time before the arrival of the Lioness and her prize.

A cheer from the crowd greeted Percy Wyndham as he landed; but after acknowledging it, by raising his hat, he entered a carriage and was whirled rapidly away to the gubernatorial mansion.

He found the Governor Commandante just arising from breakfast, and was received most cordially by that dignitary, whom he well knew.

"Well, my young hero, it seems you have captured your old foe, Forrester, the Freebooter, once more, for I have not forgotten your gallant taking of the Skeleton Corsair some time ago," he said in greeting Percy Wyndham, who answered:

"No, Governor; I have made no capture, but am simply appointed by the victor to deliver up her vessel and her prize, for I refer to the fair lady of the sea known as Captain Bessie."

"Hal to that mysterious girl who came here some time ago and got from me a commission to hunt pirates, and thereby save herself from being outlawed for having no flag."

"You say the Lioness of the Sea captured the pirate, Mr. Wyndham?"

"She did, sir."

"And what part played you in the affair?"

In a few words Percy Wyndham told what had occurred, and that Bessie Gito had already left off her wild life as a sea rover.

"And there is no doubt of the death of this accursed freebooter, Forrester?"

"Captain Bessie shot him down, Governor, for I saw him fall, and the men threw him overboard with the other slain."

"Then that settles him, and the reward shall go to that strange girl, for there is a large price upon his head, as you know, Mr. Wyndham."

"Yes, sir; but Miss Gito requests that you divide it among her crew, as also the prize money for the pirate schooner."

"I will do as she requests; but what officers of the pirate craft have you prisoners?"

"None, Governor."

"All killed? Then they must have fought desperately."

"The craft was well handled, Governor, until Captain Forrester fell, and I boarded at the time."

"With your slaves, you say?"

"Yes, sir, with my black crew, who fought bravely, and, taking the pirates in the rear, forced them to cry for quarter, or spring overboard and drown, which many of them did."

"They cheated the hangman thereby, Mr. Wyndham."

"But now tell me how the Government can reward you for your valuable services, for your father was a most gallant naval officer, and I would like to see you return to the navy, which lost a great deal when you resigned your midshipman's berth."

"Thank you, Governor, but I desire nothing at the hands of my Government, for my estate necessitates my remaining at home to care for it, and my mother would not consent to my

leaving her alone even if I cared to or would do so."

"Well said, Wyndham, for it is to your honor to first think of your mother's happiness."

"But tell me of this strange girl, Captain Bessie, for she is a neighbor of yours, I believe."

"Her name is Bessie Gito, Governor, and she dwells a couple of leagues from Lakelands, my home."

"Her father was a fisherman yet a man of superior education, and, it is said, a Spanish noble in exile."

"He educated his daughter at the Convent of the Ursulines in your city, and also made of her a perfect seamstress, capable of handling and navigating almost any vessel."

"And her connection with this pirate, Forrester?"

"In some way he wronged her father, sir; and because she acted as my pilot to the Black Lagoon, when I captured his vessel, the Skeleton Schooner, he sought, when once more afloat, to avenge himself upon Juan Gito and his daughter."

"And then she took to the sea to run him down."

"No, sir, not until her father was killed, and—"

"By Forrester?"

"No, Governor, by Mr. Mark Mortimer, who killed him in his library at The Everglades, claiming that Gito came there to take his life."

"That young Mortimer is a strange character, Wyndham, and very fast."

"I have feared that you and he would meet in the *duello* some day, as it was by his hand your father fell."

Percy Wyndham smiled, and the Governor could not understand that smile, so continued:

"Pardon me for touching upon the subject; but it always seemed strange to me that when his father fell in a duel with you, he should call out your father, instead of *yourself*, to avenge the death of Major Mortimer."

"I tell you, Wyndham, these vendettas are a curse upon our sunny Southern land," and the Governor spoke warmly.

"They are indeed, sir, and I hope the day will soon come when feuds will no longer be handed down from generation to generation as heirlooms," sadly responded Percy Wyndham.

"I am glad to hear you say so, Wyndham, and if Mark Mortimer, after you have saved his sister from death on more than one occasion, as I have heard you have, pushes this vendetta against you, he is a sorry dog, and were you to fall, I'll make an example of him, I pledge you."

"I do not think, Governor, that Mr. Mark Mortimer and myself will ever meet in a *duello*," quietly returned Percy Wyndham.

"Well, is it not strange that this high-spirited, revengeful girl, Captain Bessie, does not seek to avenge her father's death at his hands?"

"Egad, if she did so, society would be the better off for the spendthrift's removal," said the Governor, hotly.

Percy Wyndham said nothing, for he could not but think that Bessie Gito had attempted to avenge her father, and then thought that Mark Mortimer was numbered among the dead.

"Well, Wyndham, as you wish it, I will relieve you of the command of the two vessels," resumed the Governor, "and hold them, with the prisoners, until the Admiral of the Gulf Squadron returns to port, when I shall deliver them over to him with your report," and after a conversation of a few minutes longer, Percy Wyndham took his leave, accompanied by an officer sent with him to take command of the Lioness and her pirate prize.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO FOES.

IT was a little past noon, the time appointed by Percy Wyndham for his visit to Mark Mortimer, and the latter was nervously pacing the very comfortable room in the inn to which his enemy had directed him.

His face was white, rigid, from intense and bitter thought, and his eyes were fierce, as though the hatred in his heart gleamed from them.

Gratitude for his escape he did not feel toward the foe who had befriended him, for the hate he had for him had been sown in infancy, and nurtured up to that present time.

A wild profligate, he had caused his father no end of sorrow, and forced him, for honor's sake, to pay his gambling debts, and support him in his luxurious style of living in the city, and yet had demanded a meeting with Captain Wyndham, to avenge that father, instead of the son who had slain him.

Cursing Percy Wyndham for his delay, he yet dreaded the meeting with his noble foe, and started guiltily when a low rap came upon the door.

"Come in!"

Before giving the abrupt invitation, he had thrown himself with an assumed air of indifference into an easy-chair, and picked up a book from the table, as though disturbed in his reading.

The door opened, and Percy Wyndham entered, no longer attired in his white planter costume, but in an elegant suit, which Caleb had

brought him from his yacht in the lake four miles distant from the city.

"Good morning, sir!"

"Be seated, pray," coldly said Mark Mortimer, half rising and motioning to a chair on the other side of the table from him.

"Thank you, Mr. Mortimer, but I will stand here," and Percy Wyndham walked over to the mantle-piece and leant gracefully upon it, while he turned his dark, earnest eyes full upon the guilty man before him.

"As you please, sir; but I am too indolent to stand, when a comfortable chair is offered me," was the reply.

"Mr. Mortimer, I congratulate you, sir, upon your escape from two sad misfortunes," said Percy Wyndham, bluntly, as though determined to at once turn the conversation into the channel he desired.

"And those are, sir?"

"First, that I prevented you taking your own life upon a pirate deck, and thus leaving a sadly-stained name behind you."

The Corsair Planter winced at this, and asked, haughtily:

"And secondly, sir?"

"That you escaped being hanged as a pirate, for I have just left the Governor-Commandante, and he says that as soon as the Admiral returns to port, every one of Captain Forrester's crew shall be strung up to the yard-arm."

Mark Mortimer turned livid at this, and his voice faltered as he asked:

"Does he suspect my connection with the Freebooter?"

"He does not, sir, nor does any one else, excepting Bessie Gito, and for the sake of your sister she will keep the secret, as I will also for the reason that I would not cause her more sorrow than she now suffers."

"My dear sir, you seem not to be aware that my sister Mabel is dead, and consequently beyond feeling sorrow," sneered Mark Mortimer.

"I am aware, sir, that it is so believed, and that you are looked upon as the inheritor, by her death, of The Everglades, your late father's estate—"

"My late father who fell by your hand," sneered the Corsair Planter, and, without the quiver of a muscle Percy Wyndham continued:

"Yes, whom I shot in a duel, sir; but to continue, sir, upon the subject of which we were speaking, permit me to say that *your sister still lives!*"

"God above!"

With this exclamation, uttered in a tone of horror, Mark Mortimer sprung to his feet, and gazed with livid, quivering face upon Percy Wyndham.

"I speak the truth, sir," coolly said Percy Wyndham.

"It is a lie, sir; she lies at the bottom of the sea," almost shrieked the man.

"Be careful, Mr. Mortimer, or you may drive me to save the hangman trouble in the future."

"Ha! do you dare—"

"I dare tell you, sir, that your sister lives."

"You cannot prove your words," and Mark Mortimer sunk back in his chair once more.

"I know, sir, that when you were ill in the city here, and sent your yacht to The Everglades for your sister, that she started to come to you to nurse you in your illness."

"I know, too, that on the way across the Lake, one night of storm, she was hurled overboard—"

"Great God! *Hurled* overboard, you say, sir?" and Mark Mortimer then trembled like an aspen.

"Yes, a man whom your negro crew had picked up in a boat, and claiming to be a shipwrecked mariner, threw her into the sea."

"Was he a madman?" gasped Mark Mortimer.

"His motive for the deed of crime is not positively known, Mr. Mortimer."

"But how know you this?"

"From your sister's own lips."

Again did Mark Mortimer spring to his feet, and his appearance was that of one who had heard that which had wholly unmanned him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CORSAIR PLANTER HEARS BITTER TRUTHS.

"From my sister's own lips?" gasped Mark Mortimer, as soon as he could speak.

"Yes, Mr. Mortimer."

"How did she escape death, when hurled into the sea?"

"Most miraculously, sir, as you will admit."

"You are aware that she is an expert swimmer, and she kept herself afloat for some time; but at last felt herself sinking, when a dark object appeared before her eyes."

"It was a boat she saw, and, with a great effort she reached it, and drew herself upon the deck."

"It proved to be a little craft, deserted by its crew, and water-logged; but she found provisions on board, and there remained until my yacht in passing sighted the little wreck, and I bore down to it, and was so fortunate as to save your sister from death."

"A third time, Mr. Wyndham, she owes to you her escape from danger and death?" and the words were said inquiringly.

"I have been so fortunate as to serve her, sir, on several occasions," was the cold response.

"And I owe to you many thanks, Mr. Wyndham, and were my hand not stained with the blood of your father, as yours is with my father's life, I would urge that we grasp hands in friendship."

This was said in a tone that appeared as though Mark Mortimer felt forced to make some such remark; but Percy Wyndham quickly returned:

"No, Mark Mortimer, you and I can never grasp hands in friendship, for the gulf that divides us is too wide by far."

"Accident has caused me to serve your sister, and on that account I am not one to say let the dead past bury its dead between you and I."

"Were you a man whom I esteemed as a noble foe, one whom I could hate, yet respect, I might say let the vendetta of our names go down in the graves of our fathers."

"But I cannot, sir, and this day urge that our paths in life divide forever."

"By heaven! but I have half a mind to try conclusions with you in the duello," cried Mark Mortimer, fiercely, black with rage at the words of his foe, so plainly spoken.

Percy Wyndham smiled, and answered blandly:

"Need I remind you, Mr. Mortimer, that you did *try conclusions* with me once in the *duello*, and that you were not only worsted, but forced by me to marry poor Bessie Gito, whom you had pretended to wed by a mock ceremony?"

"Enough of this, sir, and tell me where my sister is," hotly said Mark Mortimer.

"I left her, sir, under the care of my mother at Lakelands."

"At your house?"

"Yes, sir."

"A Mortimer a guest of a Wyndham?"

"In the case of Miss Mortimer, yes."

"Then my sister has fallen low indeed, in—"

"In being the sister of a *pirate*," quickly retorted Percy Wyndham, and the shot went home, for the man, hard hit, bit his lips and remained silent, while Percy continued:

"Your sister, as I said, sir, is a guest at Lakelands, though none other than my mother and one or two faithful servants, know of her presence there, and, upon my return, she will go back to her own home of The Everglades."

"Where I will join her, and let her understand that I would rather she had been lost in the sea than so far forget herself as to be the guest of a Wyndham."

"You will do no such thing, Mark Mortimer."

"Ha! do you dictate to me?" hotly cried the Corsair Planter.

"I most certainly do, sir, and will tell you why," was the cool response.

"I will be glad to know why, sir," said Mark Mortimer, with sarcasm.

"Well, sir, I know that by the terms of your father's will your sister inherits The Everglades, its slaves, and all properties left by the late Major Mark Mortimer—"

"Whom you had the honor of killing," was said in the most biting sarcasm.

"As you say, sir, whom I had the honor of shooting dead in a duel," returned Percy calmly, and he continued:

"Your inheritance you ran through with before your father's death—"

"At—"

"At my hands, sir, as you were about to remark; but your sister offered you a home with her, and part of her income, if you would give up your disreputable life, and you refused, and now she declares her intention to remain mistress of her own home."

"Still I shall go there and have a talk with her."

"You will do no such foolish thing, sir."

"Ha! who will prevent?"

"You forget, sir, that you are supposed to be dead, by one who would be as a bloodhound upon your track, did she know you were alive."

Mark Mortimer shivered, for well he knew that Percy Wyndham referred to Bessie Gito, the girl he had inveigled into a mock marriage, and had then cast off, to afterward kill her father, and by these two heinous crimes upon her win her everlasting hatred.

But he tried to brazen the matter out before Percy Wyndham, and said:

"Bah! what do I care for Bessie Gito?"

"She proved a deadly foe to Forrester, the Freebooter, Mark Mortimer, and would have been to you also, had I not stepped between."

"I'll risk her hatred and her revenge, and go to The Everglades."

"And I say no."

"But I do not fear her, Wyndham."

"Then you shall fear me, sir, for I swear to you, you shall accept my terms, or I will forget that I would save your sister sorrow and shame, and give you up to die upon the gallows as the pirate you are."

Percy Wyndham spoke with an earnestness he had not before shown, and his dark eyes flashed fire.

But his words seemed to drive the Corsair Planter to madness, for, with a cry of fury he jerked from his bosom a slender bladed knife,

and sprung upon his hated foe, with the ringing words:

"Percy Wyndham, we will test that right here, so let it be your life or mine!"

CHAPTER IX.

PERCY WYNDHAM OFFERS TERMS.

THE sudden attack, of the maddened Corsair Planter, did not throw Percy Wyndham off his guard for an instant, for, as though he had expected just such an act upon the part of his enemy, he sprung quickly one side, avoiding the blow aimed at his heart, and as he did so seized the arm of the intended assassin in a grasp that caused Mark Mortimer to utter a cry of pain.

"Drop that knife, sir!"

The order came sternly from the lips of Percy Wyndham, and he looked full into the glaring eyes that met his own.

The Corsair Planter had before felt the almost superhuman strength of the slenderly formed man before him, and with the grip upon his arm feeling as though it was held in a vise, he could but obey, for he knew that he was powerless should Percy Wyndham see fit to exert his strength against him.

With a muttered oath he unclasped his hand and the knife fell to the floor, and the blade point entering the wood, stuck there quivering.

"Be seated again, Mr. Mortimer, and hear what I have to say," coolly said Percy Wyndham.

Without a word the Corsair Planter sunk into his chair, and raising his hands, covered his face with them, either to shut out the sight of his hated enemy or to hide his emotion from his penetrating eyes.

"Mr. Mortimer, should you return to your home after all that has occurred no power on earth would keep Bessie Gito—"

"Mrs. Mortimer, my loving wife!" interrupted the Corsair Planter with a rude laugh.

"Yes, your wife in truth, and your worst foe."

"Excepting yourself, Percy Wyndham."

"Oh, no, for I do not respect you enough to hate you," was the calm retort.

Mark Mortimer uttered an oath *sotto voce*, and Percy Wyndham went on:

"I was saying that no power on earth could prevent Bessie Gito, or Mrs. Mortimer if so you prefer it, from exposing you as you really are, for that might be a sweeter revenge to her than in taking your life."

"But did she remain quiet and permit you to live at The Everglades undisturbed, I would not, for I suspect you of having plotted the death of your beautiful and noble sister—Hold on, for you shall hear me, sir, and keep cool, for violence can avail you nothing."

With a groan, feeling that he was mastered, Mark Mortimer again covered his face with his hands, while Percy Wyndham continued:

"I would fear that your sister might be taken ill and die suddenly, or be lost at sea, or meet with some sad fate, so I say to you now that from this day, do you desire to save your neck from the gallows, you must go your way through life on widely diverging paths."

"What your connection with Forrester, the Freebooter, may have been I know not, and you may have saved up from piracies a large sum in gold—"

"Hold! For my own justification let me say one thing to you, Mr. Wyndham," almost pleaded the Corsair Planter.

"Certainly, sir."

"I knew Frank Forrester during his sojourn in this city only as a gambler and a yachtsman of supposed large means."

"When he bought, as he said, the smuggler craft Jack-o'-lantern, which you now have, I knew not that he was a smuggler captain, and less still that he was none other than Forrester, the Freebooter."

"After the secret came out I, with others, was joked with upon having been his friend, and when I went to The Everglades, believing my sister dead, and, according to my father's will, to take possession of my property, I was surprised by a visit from Forrester."

"He told me that he had secured another vessel since your capture of his Skeleton Schooner, and was going on a cruise that would enrich him, and begged me to go as his first lieutenant."

"I scorned his offer, when he boldly asserted that he would accuse me of having murdered my sister, which was of course ridiculous; but his threats so alarmed me that I consented to go on a short cruise with him, and it was while with him I was captured, as you know."

"But I can now assert that I was his prisoner and—"

"Pardon me; you can do no such thing, for the crew are not hanged yet, and they could testify that you were Forrester's first officer and proclaimed yourself chief after you saw your captain fall."

"No, that story won't do, and you will be forced to accept my terms."

"What terms have you to offer, sir?"

"Did you save any gold from your piracies on the high seas?" was the cool question.

"Curse you, no!"

"Have you any money that you can call your own?"

"I mean any sum of importance?"

"I have scarcely a thousand dollars."

"And your debts?"

"I was fortunate at play when last in the city, and owe no gambling debts now."

"Very well, sir."

"Now, do you object to a foreign cruise?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because, Mr. Mortimer, I can supply you with enough money, which properly invested, will make you a fortune in England, or to whatever land you seek."

"You can simply allow your sister to report that you have left America for a term of years, and, as you owe nothing, it will not be thought that you ran away from your creditors, more especially, as you are considered rich."

"Leave this land at once, on a vessel that sails for London to-night, and I will give you ten thousand dollars, on condition that you never return, or at least until you are a changed man, under penalty of dying at the hands of Bessie Gito, or being arrested for piracy."

"Remain here until another sun shall rise, and I swear to you, I shall deliver you over to the Governor as what you are, a pirate."

"For your sister's sake, to save her shame and anguish of heart, I do this; but refuse, and even she cannot save you."

"Now, Mark Mortimer, you know my terms, and I await your answer."

The Corsair Planter saw that Percy Wyndham was in deadly earnest, and meant every word he said.

For a moment he remained in deep thought, and then he said:

"Wyndham, in spite of the graves between you, I believe that you love Mabel Mortimer, and that she loves you, and once I am out of the way, she will forget she is a Mortimer, and become your wife."

"Now hear me!"

"I accept your terms, and will sail on the vessel you speak of, upon payment of the money to me, ten thousand dollars."

"But I shall know all that transpires between The Everglades and Lakelands, and, so help me Heaven, I swear, if Mabel Mortimer becomes your wife, I shall return, taking all consequences, and the revenge I will seek, will cause you both to wish to God you had never been born."

Percy Wyndham was very pale, but made no other reply than:

"Here, sir, is the money."

"Please count it and see that it is right," and he turned upon the table several packages of bank notes.

"They are right," returned Mark Mortimer, who carefully counted them.

"If you wish them exchanged for gold, or foreign notes, I will send a broker to you here, and also, I will send you a carriage at dark to convey you on board the clipper ship."

"You are very kind, sir," sneered the Corsair Planter, and bowing low with mock politeness, he added, sarcastically:

"I shall be ready, sir, when the vehicle arrives."

"Good-day, Mr. Percy Wyndham."

Percy Wyndham simply bowed, and, turning, left the room, and the Corsair Planter was alone with his own bitter thoughts.

CHAPTER X. THE TRIPLE FEUD.

There was no more elegant house upon the Gulf shores than was Lakelands, the estate of the Wyndhams, and which had been handed down for three generations, each one adding to its beauty and its comfort.

The house was built in the old Spanish style, large and rambling, and from basement to attic was as homelike and comfortable as the most luxurious-loving person could wish.

The lawn sloped to the waters of the little harbor in front, and was here and there dotted with those exquisite trees of the far South known as the live oak.

Flower gardens surrounded the mansion, and away back were the homes, the "quarters" of the numerous slaves that called Percy Wyndham master.

Then, a mile distant along the curving shores, was The Everglades, the plantation home of the Mortimers.

It, too, was a grand mansion, with lawn, pleasure gardens and slave quarters surrounding it, and in front the broad, blue waters.

Between the two estates was a magnolia park, with walks and drives through it, and a rustic fence dividing the lands.

Time was, in the long ago, when the young heirs of Lakelands and The Everglades were friends; but love and rivalry had displaced friendship, the treachery of a Mortimer to a Wyndham followed, and then began the feud that culminated in a cruel vendetta.

Not content with having stolen from Captain Percy Wyndham, the father of my hero, his bride, Major Mark Mortimer, the parent of the one who figures in this romance as the Corsair Planter, had cruelly betrayed into a supposed marriage, while in Mexico, for he was al-

ready married, the fair Mexican girl who afterward became the wife of his rival, who knew not the dark page in her past life, for, deserted by the one she had believed was her husband, and believing him lost at sea, the young bride of a few weeks only had taken the name of her uncle, whose heiress she was, and in another land had met Captain Wyndham.

But the secret came out through complications in matters of inheritance, and Mrs. Wyndham, who had been brought to Lakelands to live, discovered that he who had deceived her in her girlhood, pretending to be lost at sea, was the master of the adjoining estate of The Everglades.

It was a bitter blow to her, but as there was a feud between the names of Wyndham and Mortimer, the secret was kept, until at last, as I have said, an inheritance in Mexico to her former name brought forth the story.

Captain Wyndham, with his son living and on the verge of man's estate, censured not his dearly loved wife, but swore vengeance against the man who had wronged her so cruelly, as well as himself, and knowing that while he (Mark Mortimer) lived, and having previously married the mother of his children, Mrs. Wyndham could not claim to be legally his wife, he determined to end the life of the one who stood between them.

Long before, when Major Mark Mortimer had stolen his promised bride from him, Captain Wyndham had called him to face him in the *duello*, and given him a wound that had nearly cost him his life.

It was while in Mexico, traveling to recuperate from this wound, that the evil man had met and pretended to wed the fair Mexican, and now, more than a score of years after his duel with his treacherous rival and one time friend, Captain Wyndham determined to face him again, and swore that the meeting should be fatal.

But his wife was no woman to tamely submit to this, for she had erred in not confessing her early marriage, as she had believed, to Major Mortimer; and as she was the wronged one more particularly, her Mexican blood burned for revenge, and she would not allow her husband to face a danger for her.

Consequently she plotted to get him to New Orleans, sending him there in his yacht to search for Major Mortimer, whom she led him to believe was in that city, and then sent a trusty slave, Uncle Toby, with a note asking Major Mortimer to meet her at Magnolia Arbor, a rustic retreat in the park between the two mansions.

There she went with her faithful mulattress maid, Phoebe, and there Major Mortimer came to meet her, wondering strangely at the summons.

It was the scene of his duel with Captain Wyndham, over twenty years before, and it became the scene of a deadly tragedy; for the revengeful woman, wishing to save her husband and son from facing a man in the *duello*, who was known to be a dead shot and wholly merciless, forced him to meet her.

Major Mark Mortimer was cleverly ensnared by the woman he had so deceived, for Uncle Toby held him covered with a rifle, at his mistress's orders, and he was compelled to take his stand opposite the enraged woman, and meet her with dueling pistol.

It may be that Major Mortimer would not have fired upon her; but certain it is that Phoebe, knowing his reputation as a shot, secretly, to save her mistress, exchanged his loaded pistol for an unloaded one, and the result was he fell before the deadly aim of the woman, who knew not the clever trick her maid had played.

And after the fatal shot the maid confessed, and with a cry of anguish Mrs. Wyndham fell across the body of the man she had slain, just as her son Percy appeared upon the scene.

It was a sad sight for that son to see, a sadder tale for him to hear, and, as it came from the lips of Uncle Toby that his mother had killed Major Mortimer, two horsemen, neighboring planters, rode up, and instantly the noble boy took upon himself the name of having fought the duel and slain his adversary, thus shielding his mother.

Fighting a duel without seconds in the South was a crime, and Percy Wyndham surrendered himself, stood his trial, and was set free, for he had kept his mother at home under lock and key, under pretense that her mind had broken down under the shock, and no one doubted it, for Captain Wyndham, who had gone to New Orleans to meet Major Mortimer, when the tidings reached him, was confronted by the slain man's son and forced to fight him, and he became the second victim.

Having taken the bold stand he did, Percy Wyndham forced the belief upon his mother that it was better for the world to believe that he had killed Major Mortimer, and thus it was said to be at the time of the opening of this story.

Anxious to keep in retirement after the gaze of the public had been turned upon himself, his mother and his home, Percy Wyndham kept either at Lakelands, or cruised about in his yacht, and thus accident brought him more

prominently into notice than ever, though his capture of the Skeleton Schooner, whose captain was, after dwelling in New Orleans, a potted lion of society, under the name of Frank Forrester, no one dreaming that the handsome yachtsman, as he professed to be, was none other than Forrester, the Freebooter.

Bound to Forrester by large gambling debts, Mark Mortimer, who had so squandered his expected inheritance, as to be left almost a beggar at his father's death, had bargained the hand of his sister to the pirate, though as such, he did not then know him to be more than a gambler.

By his capture of the Skeleton Schooner, though her chief escaped, Percy Wyndham saved Mabel Mortimer from the dishonor of being bound to a buccancer, and, as the reader will remember, had more than once served her so well that, though believing him to be the slayer of her father, she had allowed her heart to go forth toward him with feelings of deepest love, which she seemed to feel was returned.

Two leagues up the coast from The Everglades, and upon a point of land jutting out from the main land, was Cliff Cottage, the peaceful home of Juan Gito and his daughter Bessie, until sorrow invaded its hearthstone, when Mark Mortimer went there and won the maiden's love, to cast her off, as the reader knows, after a mock marriage with her.

Rumor had it that her father was secretly a smuggler, and the poor girl learned, to her pain, that it was too true, and that he was but the tool of Forrester, the Freebooter, who, as Bessie was the pilot of the Jack-o'-lantern into the Black Lagoon, where lay hidden the Skeleton Schooner, swore to avenge himself upon her and Juan Gito, whom he believed to have betrayed him.

The death of her father, at the hand of Mark Mortimer, and the threats of Forrester, the Freebooter, had sent Bessie Gito to sea as a pirate huntress, and she believed she had done her revengeful work well; but the escape of Forrester by clinging to the yacht Jack-o'-lantern, and the saving of the Corsair Planter by Percy Wyndham, proves that, though she had captured the pirate vessel, her two most deadly foes yet lived to plot mischief against her and all others upon whom they felt inclined to strike a deadly blow.

Thus waged the triple feud along the sunny coast, from Lakelands to Cliff Cottage, at the time this romance opens.

CHAPTER XI. THE RETURN.

SEVERAL weeks have passed since the battle between the Lioness and the pirate craft, and one pleasant afternoon two persons were seated in the library of Lakelands, the one reading aloud, the other engaged in sketching through the open window the mansion and grounds of The Everglades.

The one who was reading was a woman of perhaps forty, though at a first glance she seemed much younger; but a closer look betrayed lines about the mouth and eyes, which either had been left there by the tracks of time, or of great suffering.

It was a face that had been exquisitely lovely in early youth, and in after years was certainly very handsome, proud and refined, yet full of sadness.

The form was matronly and graceful, tall and well proportioned, and the close-fitting black dress she wore was very becoming.

As she read her voice was rich and full, and her smile, as now and then something in the book proved amusing, was very winning.

Her companion was a girl-woman, to use a paradox, for her years were very few, but, not always tinged with sunshine, she had developed into maidenhood when young in her teens.

Her face was a study for an artist, in its calm beauty, self-power, and purity, and her form was willowy yet well developed, and most graceful.

She too wore mourning, but it was a snow-white dress, trimmed with black, and no jewelry of any kind adorned her person.

She it was who had before her an easel, and, as she sat glancing out of the open window, was sketching her own home in the distance, for it was Mabel Mortimer, the beautiful heiress of The Everglades, and the guest of her companion, Mrs. Wyndham.

"There, I have completed my sketch, Mrs. Wyndham, and as I have made one of Lakelands, from my window, I will send it to you and keep this one."

"See! how do you like it?"

She held up the sketch to view, as she spoke, and it certainly was the work of an artist.

"It is beautiful, Mabel, and if the other, of Lakelands as seen from The Everglades, is half as good, I shall prize it greatly."

"It is far better; for I whiled away many an hour on that one, and I think the view of Lakelands from my window is even more beautiful than The Everglades from here—oh! there comes Uncle Toby."

As Mabel Mortimer spoke, an old negro entered the room, hat in hand.

It was Uncle Toby, the factotum of Lakelands, and his Nancy and daughter Phoebe were also

privileged characters about the place, as is the wont with the faithful old blacks in a Southern home even to this day, and since they are free, for old customs and old friends, be they white or black, are not cast off as old clothes.

"Mistis, I come to tell you that the Lantern is comin'."

"My son's yacht?" and Mrs. Wyndham sprang to her feet, her face radiant with joy, while Mabel Mortimer flushed and remained silent.

"Yes, mistis, it is in the offing, an' comes flying for the harbor."

"Come, Mabel, this hiding we will end, for who cares if you are the guest of Lakelands."

"Come, go with me to the pier and meet Percy," said Mrs. Wyndham, referring to the fact that since Mabel Mortimer had been picked up at sea by Percy Wyndham, her being at the home of her brother's foes had been kept a secret.

Throwing on their sunshades, the two ladies started for the pier, accompanied by Uncle Toby.

There, not a league away, the well-known Jack-o'-lantern was visible, running in toward the harbor under a pressure of sail, and Uncle Toby handed his mistress a spyglass he took from a bracket upon the side of the boat-house.

"I see Percy, and he is looking at us through his glass," cried Mrs. Wyndham.

And watching the beautiful vessel as she rushed in toward the harbor, the ladies chatted together pleasantly of the achievement of Captain Bessie, and of Percy's timely arrival on board the Lioness, for Caleb had told them all, and wondered what had been said of the gallant affair in the city.

"I wonder if he can tell me aught of my poor brother?" said Mabel, with a sigh.

"Doubtless, as he must have heard of Mr. Mortimer in the city," somewhat coldly answered Mrs. Wyndham.

"I am not sure he is there, you know, my dear Mrs. Wyndham, for Toby, you know, said my slaves reported Mark as leaving home suddenly, and giving no specified time for his return."

"Do not worry about him, Mabel, for he will take care of himself—see! the Lantern luffs up now to let fall her anchor."

The beautiful craft had now run into the little harbor, and reaching her anchorage quickly came to a halt, while Percy Wyndham, with a wave of his hand to those on the pier, sprang into his boat and was rowed ashore by the four black oarsmen.

"Caleb, the crew can go ashore by day, but at night I wish you all on board the yacht," said Percy, as he sprang out upon the water-stairs and was welcomed by his mother in an affectionate manner.

"And you, too, are here to greet me, Miss Mortimer," he said, as he grasped the hand of the beautiful girl, in whose eyes were tears, for she could not speak from the emotions that swept over her.

"Well, Percy, what of your capture?" said Mrs. Wyndham, as the three walked slowly back to the mansion.

"Not my capture, mother, but Captain Bessie's, for she was the Pirate Huntress, you know, and I only came in at the last moment to be shouldered with the carrying of the two vessels to New Orleans."

"What a strange girl is that Bessie Gito; but I am glad to know she has given up her unwomanly life upon the sea and returned to her home," said Mrs. Wyndham.

"And how is she, mother?"

"Toby, or some of the men, I send every day with delicacies, and to inquire after that young man who was so fearfully wounded, and they say she is well, has resumed her feminine attire, and, assisted by an old sailor, devotes herself to Lieutenant Langdon, which is, I believe, the name of the young officer."

"And Langdon, how is he?"

"Improving slowly, but from what Toby says of his wound, it is a miracle that he lives."

"He received that in saving Bessie, and she is not one to forget it."

"I will go over to-morrow and see them."

"And what thought the Governor-Commandante and Admiral of the capture of that bold Freebooter?"

"The Admiral was not there, mother, but the Governor was, of course, delighted, and for the little part I played in the affair, wished me to re-enter the navy as an officer."

"But I respectfully declined."

"That was good of you, Percy, for it is so lonely here when you are away."

"I will try and not be away often, mother."

"But was not there great disappointment that Forrester and his officers were killed, and not captured to be hanged?" said Mrs. Wyndham, returning to the subject of the pirate vessel.

"Yes, for a brave and honorable man can ask no better death than to die upon his deck."

"Caleb said all of Forrester's officers were killed, Percy?"

"It was a desperate fight, mother," was the evasive reply.

"And none escaped?"

"The dead pirates were thrown overboard,

mother, and the wounded and unhurt were taken to New Orleans, where they will doubtless be hanged for their crimes."

"It was very brave of you, Mr. Wyndham, to go to the aid of the weaker party."

"We saw the flashes of the guns, and they lighted up the vesseis, and it was fearful to look upon," said Mabel.

"Yet my gallant black crew never wavered, and more than half of them never had a weapon in their hands before that night."

"I hope none of the boys are the worse for the wounds they received, mother?"

"No; they were but slightly wounded, several of them; but how they escaped in that mad carnage, and you, too, God only knows!"

"Oh, they carried the fight by their coming only, and it quickly ended after we boarded."

"Tell the boys, Uncle Toby, I shall come over to the quarters to-night to see them," and again turning to his mother, he continued:

"I hope you had the bodies that drifted ashore buried, mother?"

"Yes, my son."

"And was Captain Forrester's body recognized?"

"No, though Uncle Toby aided in burying over a score, and others were washed up upon The Everglades shore. And, Percy, one thing is stranger."

"Well, mother?"

"Caleb left one of the yacht's boats at Cliff Cottage, as the Gito crafts were all hauled out and housed, and the next morning it had disappeared."

"Got loose and floated off, doubtless."

"No; there were tracks seen of where a man had shoved it off the beach, and the same foot-marks were traced around the beach and up to the cottage."

"That is strange, mother."

"Yes, and Mabel and I thought that perhaps some bold swimmer among the pirates might have escaped, and dreaded that Forrester was the one, as he always manages to get away."

"No. Bessie shot him in the head, and I saw him lying upon the deck, and the crew of the Lioness, before I could prevent it, threw him into the sea, so don't worry about him."

"Now, here we are at the house, and I am hungry for one of your good suppers, mother," said Percy, assuming a gayety he did not in his heart feel.

CHAPTER XII.

PERCY WYNDHAM TELLS HIS STORY.

THE supper, which Percy Wyndham had longed for, was so tempting, that he really enjoyed it greatly, in spite of the weight at his heart, for not only had he to prevaricate, regarding her brother, to Mabel Mortimer, but also to Bessie Gito, while the missing boat of the Lantern, and strange footprints along the shore, had set him to thinking in a way he could not shake off, for it brought upon him a foreboding of evil.

After supper Percy visited the negro quarters, and had a gleeful welcome from his faithful slaves.

His mother and Mabel accompanied him, and it made the honest negroes stare to see the heiress of The Everglades the guest of their mistress and young master.

"I guesses the young massa an' missis done bury de hatchum, an' I'se glad, fer de good old time 'tween der two plantations gwine ter come back a-hummin', I tells yer," said one old negro, who remembered the jolly days of the long ago before the vendetta drew its pall over the hearts of all.

In a pleasant way Percy thanked the field hands, who had volunteered that night as fighting seamen, for their gallant services, and looked after the few wounded, who were all about again.

Then the master of Lakelands, with his mother and Mabel, returned to the mansion, and Percy heard the question he had dreaded ever since his return:

"Mr. Wyndham, did you hear of, or see, my brother in the city?"

"Yes, Miss Mortimer, I did, and I bear to you a message from him."

"He gave you a message for me, Mr. Wyndham?" asked Mabel, in intense surprise, and with a flutter of pleasure at her heart, as she hoped that Mark Mortimer had at last proven willing to forget the past.

"Yes, Miss Mortimer, for I felt it my duty to inform him of your being not dead as he supposed, with all others."

"I visited him, told him the story of your miraculous escape from death, and that you were under my mother's protection."

"And his answer?" asked Mabel, in a low tone.

"He was startled, of course, by hearing that you had risen from the dead, as it were, and angry, pardon me for telling you so, that you had forgotten, as he said, that you were a Mortimer, and had crossed the threshold of your foes."

"And, Mr. Wyndham, did it end there?" eagerly cried Mabel, fearing that her fierce-natured brother had gone, perhaps, beyond all bounds in his fury.

"I am glad to say that it did, Miss Mortimer, and though you may regret it, your brother has decided to leave his native land—"

"Leave his home?"

"He said he had no home, and with a few thousands he had in hand, he would seek a home in England, never to return."

"Poor, poor Mark, how bitterly he has erred."

"But, Mr. Wyndham, can you not arrange to send him some money from me?"

"I know that he cannot have a great deal, and I have plenty that I have no use for, lying idle in the bank, so pray let me send him what I can, for, though he has treated me harshly, he is of my own kindred, and I forgive, though I may not readily forget," she said, sadly.

"Your brother certainly needs no aid now, Miss Mortimer, further than he has, and he sailed for England four nights ago."

"Poor Mark, although too unforgiving toward me to live near me, when I have buried the dead past toward you, who though foes in name, are my truest, best friends, I yet wish him *bon voyage* and God speed in his new home," said Mabel, but to this wish neither Mrs. Wyndham or her son said "Amen."

As there was now no further reason that Mabel should remain at Lakelands, she expressed her determination to return to her home, and Percy ordered the carriage and accompanied by his mother, drove her to The Everglades.

The first one that beheld the return of his young mistress, was Duke, the former confidential valet of Major Mortimer, and late of Mark Mortimer, and a mulatto that had attempted to avenge his master's death by killing Percy Wyndham, who gave him a wound that well-nigh cost him his life.

Duke had also again felt the weight of Percy's hand, when he had attempted to spy upon his movements, and the mulatto had no love for the young planter.

With his young master at The Everglades, the mulatto had assumed some importance, which Mabel had quickly put an end to, by showing that he was her slave and not her brother's.

What had become of Mark Mortimer Duke did not know.

Mark had come back with the negro from New Orleans, when Mabel was supposed to be dead, to take possession of The Everglades, which by will, went to him upon his sister's death, and then had mysteriously left, saying he knew not when he should return home, and the mulatto was ignorant that Captain Forrester had been there in disguise after his master.

Neither was he aware that Mabel had been saved, and when the Lakelands carriage drove up to the door of The Everglades, the pompous Duke descended the steps, wondering at so remarkable an occurrence, and ready to be insolent.

Out sprang Percy Wyndham, without noticing the mulatto, and following him came Mabel whom he politely assisted to alight from the vehicle.

Duke was, like all of his race, superstitious, and beholding his mistress, whom he believed to be dead, suddenly appear before him, he started back, tripped on the steps leading to the piazza and fell heavily, while he cried:

"Oh mistis! is it you or your ghost?"

"It is not my ghost, Duke, I assure you, and I owe it to Mr. Wyndham that such is not the case."

"See that the house is at once lighted up and thrown open," coldly said Mabel, for she had never liked the mulatto.

"You will come in surely?" she continued, turning to Mrs. Wyndham.

"Not this evening," returned Mrs. Wyndham, and it was evident she was deeply moved, in coming to the home of the Mortimers even as she did.

"Please do, just to cross the threshold if no more, and have a glass of wine with me."

The light shone full upon the beautiful face, and Mrs. Wyndham could not but refuse, and she and Percy crossed the threshold of The Everglades.

Percy noticed the evil glimmer in the eyes of the mulatto, as he served the wine, and made up his mind that Duke needed watching.

After a short visit, a glass of wine together, and extracting a promise from Mabel to soon visit Lakelands the mother and son drove homeward, the road leading them directly over the spot where Major Mark Mortimer had fallen before the shot of Mrs. Wyndham, and which was believed to be sent by Percy Wyndham.

Neither spoke of the past, and as Mabel Mortimer knew not the secret, they were content to let it rest so.

But memory would not always down at will, and the skeleton in the closet of the Lakelands mansion would not away.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT CLIFF COTTAGE.

THE afternoon following his arrival home Percy Wyndham sprang into a small sail-boat, and with only Caleb as his companion,

darted out of the harbor of Lakelands before a stiff breeze.

Gaining an offing he headed up the coast, running half a mile off-shore, and, as he sat at the helm, gazed earnestly at the lovely home of Mabel Mortimer.

As the boat shot by an opening in the trees, he caught sight of her fair face at the window of her room, and instantly he doffed his hat, and the salute was answered with a wave of a snowy kerchief.

On past The Everglades the sail-boat went, and its destination was Cliff Cottage, the home of Bessie Gito.

The brow of the young planter wore a troubled look, for he had an ordeal before him he little liked.

He had passed through one ordeal with Mabel, and it had been agreed between them to let it be thought by all that Mark Mortimer had mysteriously disappeared, as Percy had hinted that Bessie Gito had sworn to take his life.

Now he had to face the revengeful girl with deception in word and manner, and, his high spirit rebelled at the thought, while he fretted under the thought of deceiving the world in regard to Major Mortimer's death, even to shield his mother, and that, to save Mabel from sorrow and shame he had also to keep from her the real secret of what her brother was in reality, and why he had left America.

Rounding the bold headland, upon which stood the pretty cottage of the unfortunate girl, Percy ran into the basin, and sprung lightly out upon the sandy shore.

Leaving Caleb in the boat he wended his way up to the cottage, and was discovered by Binnacle Ben, who was smoking his pipe upon the settee on one side of the door.

"Ahoy, cap'n, but you are as welcome as the paymaster in the foke'sal, sir, and Cap'n Bessie—I means ther missus, sir, for she have dropped her pants and tuk to petticoats ag'in, will be as glad to see you as ef you was her own beau."

Percy shook hands warmly with the old tar, and just then out of the cabin glided Bessie Gito.

She had looked the handsome, fearless boy in her uniform, but now, in her feminine garb, she was very lovely.

Her face, however, was very pale, her eyes hollow, and she had the appearance of having suffered.

Grasping the hand of Percy Wyndham, she said, softly:

"I knew you would not desert me, but come upon your return home."

"Yes, I arrived last evening at Lakelands, and I tried to attend to your orders in regard to the vessels, for I surrendered them to the Governor in the absence of the Admiral, and here is his release in writing, given to me for you, and a letter complimenting you upon your great work."

"Ah, Mr. Wyndham, it would have ended sadly but for you, and to you I owe all, ay, even to the revenge I gained."

"But tell me, could any of the men tell you aught of Mark Mortimer?"

"Not one of them knew what became of him, Bessie," was the answer, and Percy knew the torture had begun.

"Was it not remarkably strange that he should have taken to piracy?" she asked.

"I can account for that through his having been driven to it by Forrester, the Freebooter, who held him in his power."

"Mortimer was a gambler, you know, hard pressed with his debts, and Captain Forrester doubtless urged him to go with him on a cruise, telling him he could return with a fortune."

"That is the way I look at it, for he was no coward to fly to piracy because he knew I was upon his track."

"Yet neither his body nor Forrester's, so far as I can learn, has been picked up along the coast, though many others have."

"The tide, doubtless, carried many bodies far from here, Bessie."

"True; but I would feel better had I seen them dead, and knew them to be."

"By the way, your negro sailing-master left me the gig of the Lantern when he brought us ashore, and that night it was stolen; and strange tracks, made by a man's foot, and a small one, too, were traced along the shore up to the cabin, and thence to where he had pushed the boat off."

"Don't let that trouble you, Bessie, for it may have been that some bold swimmer of the pirates escaped, for many jumped overboard when I boarded with my black crew."

"It may be, but the fight was over a league off-shore, and both wind and tide would be against a swimmer, and few could have reached the land."

"Well, Bessie, Forrester certainly could not, for you shot him down."

"And Mark Mortimer?"

"If he escaped why should he remain hidden, Bessie, when long before this he would have known that he was not mentioned among the pirates?"

"That is true Mr. Wyndham," said Bessie, thoughtfully, and then she added, almost savagely:

"I am Bessie Gito now, but should those men have escaped, I would be once more a Nemesis."

"Come, Bessie, stick to your petticoats in future," said Percy, pleasantly, and then he asked:

"Tell me now how your patient is."

"Lieutenant Langdon?"

"Yes, if that is his name."

"Raoul Langdon is his name."

"Raoul Langdon? Why, that is the same name of an officer in the navy," said Percy, with surprise.

"Come in and see him, and perhaps he may tell you of himself," and Bessie led the way into the comfortable little cabin.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STORY OF WRONG.

UPON a cot in the little sitting room of Cliff Cottage, Percy Wyndham, when he entered with Bessie, beheld a young man with a marble-like, haggard face, pinched with intense suffering.

He was emaciated, yet his eyes were clear and full of expression, and his features were refined and of a noble cut.

He glanced toward Bessie, and a smile lighted up his pale face, and then he looked at Percy Wyndham and said softly:

"I am glad to see you, sir."

"And I am sorry to see you such a sufferer, Mr. Langdon, and I have come over to see if I can serve you in any way?" and Percy took the hand of the wounded man in his own.

"No, thank you, for Miss Bessie has cared for me as tenderly as were I her own brother, and Binnacle Ben is also an excellent nurse."

"It is pleasant to know that you are out of danger now, and will soon be able to get out, for a few more weeks will bring you round all right."

"In the meantime, if there is any service I can render you, I would be glad to do it."

"You are very kind, Mr. Wyndham, and your mother has not forgotten me as many little remembrances have been sent."

"Please thank her for me, and, as you ask it, I will frankly tell you that there is a request I have to make you."

"You have but to name it, sir."

"Well, sir, strange as it may seem to you, I am an officer of the navy."

"I told Bessie that there was such a name on the register as a lieutenant."

"It is true, sir; but I have been on special duty of late, and my time of limit is about up, and I would have you make for me my report to my captain."

"With pleasure, sir," said Percy, wondering how it was that a lieutenant of the navy could have been an officer upon the schooner of Captain Bessie.

"The truth is, Mr. Wyndham, that I lived in Maine, and three years ago I had a happy home and an old father and mother."

"I had a sister, too, then, a beautiful girl," and the young officer was silent a moment, for he seemed too deeply moved to speak, and Percy said:

"Wait until you are stronger, Lieutenant Langdon, if you care to tell me aught that is painful to relate."

"No, I must speak now, for I am strong enough."

"I spoke of my beautiful sister, whom I parted with when I went on a foreign cruise, with every hope that she would become the wife of a noble fellow, my shipmate."

"But she went to Boston to boarding-school, and there met a man much her senior, yet one of strange fascinations, and he won her heart from the one to whom she had pledged it, and he asked her to become his wife."

"He returned with her to Maine, in vacation time, and so fascinated my poor parents, that they gave their consent for her to become his wife, although they knew nothing of him more than he told about himself, and that was merely that he was a seaman, and owned a small vessel trading between Boston and the West Indies."

"My sister Kate became his wife, and she sailed with him in his vessel, a schooner of a couple of hundred tons; but to her horror she discovered that the man was no more than a lawless free rover, for in the hold of the craft he had heavy guns and a crew concealed, and had hardly been three days from port before he overhauled a vessel upon the high seas and robbed it."

"With his mask torn off as to his real character, he also treated poor Kate like a slave, and, worse still, knowing that my parents were very rich, and had made their will wholly in favor of my sister and myself, and in case one of us should die, the other to receive all, he just told her one day in one of his disagreeable moods that he had sent a hired assassin abroad to find my vessel, seek me out, and end my days."

"That little scheme, I may as well here say, fell through with, as the biter was bitten, for, attacking me one night in Havre, whither he had traced me, I ended his days, though I did not then know who he was, but heard it from my sister afterward."

"And more, this villain boldly sailed for the coast of Maine, where my parents dwelt, landed

at night with a score of men, attacked their home and killed them."

"Good heaven!" ejaculated Percy, in amazement at such a crime.

"This he did; and with no desire to have it look strange, he attacked and robbed other homes along the coast, after which he set sail with his booty."

"In a port of the West Indies he sought to get rid of my sister, for he had seen in a paper that I had been assassinated in Havre, for so it was at first reported, and he was anxious to go back and claim the fortune of his wife."

"He placed my sister in a boat one night, when in the port I referred to, and carried her ashore, where he delivered her bound and gagged into the hands of a negress, whom he had paid to poison her."

"The negress was very superstitious, and observing upon my sister's arm a birth-mark, in the shape of a cross, she feared to commit the crime and spared her, while she reported to the pirate that she had done the work well, and invited him to her cabin to see for himself."

"She had given my sister a narcotic that caused her to wear the perfect resemblance of death, and her cruel husband believed that she was really dead and paid the promised sum."

"Then he set sail for the North, ran near some port, set himself adrift in an open boat with three of his men, and his vessel sailed away, to meet him at an appointed rendezvous some months after, though he had no idea of being there, if he got the wealth he was striving for."

"As he had expected a vessel picked the boat up, and he and his hirelings had a terrible story to tell of shipwreck."

"He was taken into Boston, and from thence he went to the home of my dead parents, pretended to be astounded at the fearful death that they had met with, and then told his story of shipwreck, and the loss of his wife at sea."

"All pitied him, and when he laid claim to the property, the executors had no hesitation about giving it to him, had not the news come that I was not dead."

"This altered the affair, for the will left no alternative, but that I should have all in case of Kate's death, and thus was the scoundrel foiled at that point, and shortly after, being betrayed by one of his hirelings, he was forced to fly for his life."

CHAPTER XV.

THE CABIN BOY'S FATE.

AFTER a short silence, in which he seemed to be looking far back into the dreary past, Raoul Langdon continued:

"Soon after the flight of this accursed wretch, my cruise ended, my vessel returned to Boston, and I learned all that had taken place."

"It was a blow that prostrated me, strong as I am, or was then, to learn of the death of my parents and sister, and that the man had committed this crime for gold."

"I was entitled to quite a long leave from my ship, after my three years' cruise, but I did not accept it, and asked to be put on special service of one year, to hunt down that pirate."

"My request was granted, and I started for the West Indies, sailing in a small vessel that touched at the port where the man who betrayed the wretch, said my sister had been killed."

"Diligent search then discovered the negress, and I learned from her all I cared to know about the man I was looking for, and, to my joy, that my sister was not dead, but had, some time before, left them to avenge her wrongs by killing the villain who had so wronged her. From port to port I went searching for Kate, and for the murderer of my parents, and at last I found his vessel in port."

"Until I found Kate I did not wish to kill him, so I boldly enlisted upon his vessel as a seaman, and made myself so useful to him that he almost at once promoted me, and soon after transferred me to another vessel he also owned."

"Of this craft he made me captain over the heads of all of his other officers, and upon the schooner, judge of my surprise one day, to find my sister in the character of a supposed youth known as Kit the Cabin Boy."

"In the change that had come over her, the wig that she wore, and male attire, I should never have recognized her."

"But she knew me, and from that day we had a common cause, the killing of our foe."

"But fate was against us, for our vessels did not meet for long months, and I had no confidence in my crew to aid me, and they continually grumbled that no prizes were taken."

"That vessel I could have surrendered at any time, but I wished to take the chief."

"One day I sailed in my schooner from the island retreat, and found that Kate had remained behind."

"As ill-fortune would have it, our foe reached the rendezvous alone and in a small boat, having lost his vessel, and he there found Kate."

"He recognized her, and she tried to kill him, but failing, fled for her life and put to sea in the boat in which he had come there."

"Then he shot her as she moved away, and

her boat drifted off, and my vessel, running back for her as I was, picked it up; and the sight I saw when I looked upon her dead body nearly drove reason from me.

"I was seized by the chief, and he intended to hang me; but a faithful shipmate aided my escape that night and went with me from the island.

"The pirate came in search of us, and would have taken us, and the yard-arm of his pirate craft would have been our end, had not Captain Bess—I beg pardon, Miss Gito—picked us up and saved us from such a fate.

"Still thirsting for revenge against that man I joined the *Lioness*, and was made lieutenant, and saw him die, for, Mr. Wyndham, the man who did my sister and myself these cruel wrongs was none other than Forrest Franklin, whom you know in these waters as *Frank Forrester, the Freebooter, and Skimmer of the Seas!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TWO PASSENGERS.

THE clipper ship *London Belle* was one of the finest vessels afloat at the time of which I write, and passengers coming to and from England were anxious always to engage passage on her.

It was upon the *London Belle* that Mark Mortimer was to be a passenger to England, and as the carriage which Percy Wyndham sent for him came on time, he drove to the levee, and was soon ensconced on board in one of the finest state-rooms.

He had sent to his rooms in the city for what luggage he needed, and determined upon his arrival on board the *London Belle* to remain in his quarters until the ship sailed.

His first night on board the vessel which was bearing him from home, with the threat never to return, was by no means a restful one, and at an early hour he arose and went on deck.

There were only a few passengers to be seen, and these, like himself, seemed to have arisen to get the first sniff of the pure air of the Gulf after breathing the malarial air of the lower Mississippi.

As he stood leaning over the bulwarks watching the low, never-changing shores of the river he felt a light touch upon his arm, and started as a voice fell upon his ears asking:

"Am I mistaken in believing this to be Senor Mark Mortimer?"

Mark Mortimer had not given his own name in registering upon the ship's books, and the question was distasteful to him, for he knew that there was only one on board who recognized him.

Turning quickly he saw before him a man with a dark, sinister face, and eyes that seemed to penetrate through him.

The man was flashily dressed, paraded the jewelry he wore with bad taste, and it took but a glance for Mark Mortimer to see that he knew him.

To pretend to be other than himself was his first thought, and he said in French:

"Pardon, monsieur, but you are mistaken."

The man had spoken with the slightest Italian accent, though he spoke in Spanish in addressing Mark Mortimer.

At the response of the *Corsair Planter* he laughed lightly and answered:

"Come, Senor Mortimer, I am too great a villain myself to have another one deceive me.

"Whither bound, and what is up that you wear that sad face, almost frightened look, I may say, and are on this vessel?"

Mark Mortimer knew the man before him too well to trifle longer.

And he knew that he was an Italian, claiming to be a Spaniard, and who had made a fortune out of the misfortunes of others.

Only a short while before he had met him, and under most peculiar circumstances, so he answered:

"I am bound for England, Senor Pietro, where I shall remain."

"Then I will lose a good customer."

"And one whom you defrauded out of a large sum of money without doing the work."

"You surprise me, senor."

"I speak the truth."

"No, senor."

"I say yes."

"The dead cannot come to life again, Senor Mortimer."

"No, but those who are not dead stand in evidence against you!" hotly said Mark Mortimer.

There was no doubting but that the look upon the face that looked into Mark Mortimer's was not feigned, for it was real surprise.

"Senor Mortimer," he said, earnestly, dropping the tone of sarcasm in which he had before spoken, "the girl went overboard in a blow at night, with no vessel or land in sight, and yet you say she lives."

"She does."

"Then her escape was a miracle," said Pietro, crossing himself devoutly.

"It was miraculous, I admit; but she is a good swimmer, a small boat adrift was near her, she drew herself into it, and the next day she was picked up by—"

"By whom, senor?"

"By the very man you went to kill at his home and failed."

"Senor Wyndham?"

"The same."

"Well, this is a thrilling romance."

"It may be enjoyable to you, for you got my money; but to me it is not."

"Ah, senor, I generally do my work thoroughly."

"In the attack I made upon the house of your foe, all was most thoroughly planned."

"I chartered a yacht, as you know, disguised her well, followed the Jack-o'-lantern until I saw her run into her harbor, and then kept on up the coast until night."

"Returning at midnight, I ran into the Lake-lands harbor, attacked the house, and I alone escaped death and capture, for the Senor Wyndham has his slaves so well trained that they fought like pirates, and what he is himself, you have had occasion to know."

"I certainly have."

"Well, senor, I lost the yacht, my crew, and barely escaped, so what more could I do?"

"You could have kept on until you killed him."

"I was paid for that expedition alone."

"Always gold, it is with you," sneered Mark Mortimer.

"And so it is with you, and all of us."

"I work for gold, and gold will buy me to do anything."

"I paid you well for two deeds you were to accomplish, and you failed me."

"Better luck next time."

"There is no next time for me, Senor Pietro."

"You seem blue, senor."

"I am blue, for I am leaving my native land, from which I am driven."

"Who is the driver, senor?"

"The man you failed to kill, curse you."

"Why, Senor Mortimer, you are a fool."

"Sir!" and Mark Mortimer turned savagely upon the man.

"I repeat, senor, you are a fool to let one man drive you from your native land," was the cool response.

"It cannot be helped after the failure you made."

"Senor, don't give up, for I try again if I do not at first accomplish my purpose."

"But now I dare not."

"It is not known that you attempted the life of the Senor Wyndham?"

"Through you?"

"Say through me; but is it known?"

"No."

"Then why fear?"

"It is known, or at least I suspect that it is, that I plotted the death of my sister."

"Does she know it?"

"I think not."

"Who then?"

"You are worse than an inquisition in your questioning, Pietro," fretfully said Mark Mortimer.

"It is from interest in you, senor."

"I tell you I have no money."

"I may put you on the road to make some."

"You!"

"Yes, senor, poor Pietro."

"Well, what would you know?" asked Mark Mortimer, who was seemingly fascinated by the evil man before him.

"Who knows, or suspects, that you attempted to get rid of your sister?"

"Percy Wyndham."

"Ah!" and Pietro rubbed his hands gleefully.

"It seems to please you."

"It does, for I feared it might be worse."

"I do not well see how it could be worse, for he holds me in his power, and I compromised by leaving the country," said Mark Mortimer, keeping back the real cause of his having been found on the deck of the *Red Rover*.

"Senor Mortimer, permit me to say in all seriousness that you are an arrant fool."

Mark Mortimer felt like springing upon the man before him, but refrained, as he saw that he was in the presence of a most superior villain, so he simply said:

"Once you thought me an adept in devilish plots and cunning."

"True, senor, and you are good to plan, but not to execute."

"You are proud and aristocratic, and hold your name well before the world, so care not to have it besmirched, so run off to a foreign land to save an exposure, when you could remain here and accomplish all you could wish."

"Tell me how I can do this, Pietro, and I will pay you well," eagerly said Mark Mortimer, and the Italian laughed lightly, as though highly amused, while the young *Corsair Planter* scowled savagely at him.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHANGE OF DESTINATION.

"I THOUGHT you were penniless, Senor Mortimer," said Pietro, after a quiet laugh at the *Corsair Planter's* offer of paying him well.

"You do not think I am such a fool as to go to another land and turn beggar, do you?"

"No, senor: better remain on this side of the Atlantic and finger a fortune."

"How can I?"

"You have some little money then?"

"Yes."

"About a thousand or so?"

"More."

"Call it five."

"The amount is none of your business."

"Ah! then I cannot advise you."

"Why must you know how much money I have?"

"Because it flashed through my mind that we might go into a little speculation together."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I have a little ready cash, saved up by hard work—"

"By red work," sneered Mark Mortimer.

"Yes, yes, that is true," thoughtfully answered the villain, as though it just occurred to him how he had made some of his gold.

"Well, what have you to propose?"

"Did you ever wear a beard?" and the question was asked in a way that showed there was much behind it.

"Never!"

"No beard or mustache?"

"No; why do you ask?"

"You seem able to grow a full beard."

"Yes."

"And you have always worn your hair short, as now?"

"I have."

"Good!"

"Well, what does this mean?"

"That a beard and long hair would disguise you thoroughly, senor."

"What need have I to disguise myself?"

"None, if you go to another land, and much if you remain here."

"Then you advise me to remain here and get into trouble?"

"Remain, but keep out of trouble."

"How can I?"

"If you are not known as Senor Mark Mortimer, how will you get into trouble?"

"But how can I prevent being known?"

"Your beard, your long hair, a change in your mode of dress, will thoroughly disguise you, and your name could be changed too, and even your nationality."

"My nationality?"

"Yes, for you speak French perfectly, as I observed when you pretended not to know me."

"I do speak French as well as English."

"Good! then you can figure as Count Enrique de—"

"Bah!"

"Ah! you prefer to be a Spaniard, and I guess it is better."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"You should know that I do; as at our first meeting we conversed wholly in that language."

"Correct! and beautiful Spanish too, so you will be a Spaniard—no, a Mexican, for that is better."

"In Satan's name what are you driving at?"

"At you, for I have made a Mexican out of you—say, Don Marco Mortemas—there, isn't that splendid?"

"Pietro, I believe you are crazy."

"Not so crazy as I look, Don Marco Mortemas."

"But, see, if you remain in America, keep dark until you have grown a full beard and long, luxuriant hair, falling upon your shoulders, and while you are doing this, I can suggest work for you to do—that is, if you have, say five thousand pesos to put into a little speculation."

"Name it!"

"You are a good sailor, I suppose?"

"I have lived on the Gulf shore all my life."

"And I have lived next door to a church for years, and yet am no priest."

"Well, I am a good sailor, if that suits you."

"It does; but can you take full charge of a craft, say?"

"I am fully capable of doing so."

"Better still; but would you do so?"

"What kind of a craft?"

"Call it a smuggler."

"What!"

"Keep cool, senor, for I know to whom I am talking," was the calm reply.

Mark Mortimer had nerve, and he had a black heart to back it; but he winced at the cool villainy and satire of the man before him, and he checked the angry retort he was about to make, and said simply:

"You take advantage of me, because I hired you for some work I wished done."

"The assassin is always the master of the one who hires him, senor."

"So it seems: but what have you to propose to me?"

"Just what I said."

"To become a smuggler?"

"Yes, senor, to become commander of a smuggler craft."

"Well."

"She can ply between Havana, Jamaica and Vera Cruz, and then you have the products of these countries to run into New Orleans, where you can sell to great advantage, or rather I will, for I will attend to that part of it."

"And there is money to be made at this nefarious work?"

"Yes, señor."

"But where can I get a vessel?"

"I will arrange that for you, señor."

"Perhaps you mean to cut out one of the armed vessels now in port?"

"Oh no, señor, for that would do us no good as smugglers."

"Now if you went to pirating, why then—"

"I prefer the first proposition, sir."

"It is better, for I can get large sums for our goods and I will invest five thousand against your five thousand in securing a suitable craft, for if we were to take one of the armed schooners they would be recognized at once."

"No, señor, you want a swift sailing lugger, nominally a trader, and carrying certain goods as a blind."

"While you are doing this little sea service your hair and beard will grow, and when you are wholly metamorphosed I have other work for you to do, that will be more agreeable than smuggling."

"What is it, Pietro?"

"Don't be impatient, my dear Senor Mortimer, but wait."

"Pietro you are the wicked villain unchanged!"

"Thank you, señor. I take that as a compliment, for I am something of an artist in underhand work."

"But now get your traps together, for we must leave soon."

"Leave the ship?"

"Certainly, señor."

"Why?"

"You cannot live in England, señor, and smuggle in America."

"True; but where were you bound?"

"Only out to blue water."

"You intended leaving the ship then?"

"Certainly, señor, for I should have remembered, when once in the Gulf, that I had forgotten something of the utmost importance, and at once had the captain signal a fishing craft to run me back up the river."

"You would lose your passage money then."

"A mere bagatelle, when I have work on hand to pay me more."

"You then have a plot formed, is why you came down the river on this vessel?"

"Yes, señor."

"Come, away ahead yonder, is a smack that we will set our hopes upon, so now to breakfast, for always look after the inner man when you have work to do, and then I will come on deck, and suddenly remember that I left important papers behind, and ask the captain to hail the little craft and put me on board."

"And I?"

"Must form some excuse to go too."

"Say we are friends, and you will wait and take the next packet with your dear Don Pietro."

"Well, I follow your lead for the die is cast," said Mark Mortimer sadly, and the two plotters descended to the cabin to breakfast, Pietro enjoying his immensely and the Corsair Planter hardly tasting what was set before him, which caused his companion to remark:

"You must eat, señor, for no man can be a villain on an empty stomach."

CHAPTER XVIII.

PIETRO'S RED WORK.

WITH the air of one greatly vexed at his forgetfulness, Pietro went to the captain of the clipper ship, when he ascended to the deck after breakfast, and told him he was necessitated to return at once to the city.

"It will be impossible for me to put back, sir," said the captain bluntly.

"Nor do I ask it: but you can hail some small craft and put me on board of it, and a snug sum in gold will get them to run me up to the city."

"True, and yonder is a fishing smack now: but you'll find cramped accommodations on board, sir."

"I know what to expect, sir, so if you will hail the smack, I will go down to my state-room and get my luggage together."

When ten minutes later Pietro came on deck, he was accompanied by the cabin boy, bearing his trunk, and Mark Mortimer was with him.

"I have company, you see, captain, for my friend here will not desert me, but return to the city and cross with me in the next packet."

"I am sorry to lose two of my genial passengers," said the captain, politely, and Pietro, who was always willing to say something hateful, replied:

"Yes, our company will be a great loss to you, seeing that we have not spoken a word to you until five minutes ago: and we are so genial in our way the other passengers will sadly miss us."

"But we are ready, captain, whenever you are, and our loss will be your gain."

The captain's face flushed, and he turned away and ordered the ship to move to a boat lowered, for he had already signaled to the smack to come to.

A quarter of an hour after the clipper ship was again standing majestically on her course, while Pietro and Mark Mortimer were upon the deck of the little smack.

It was a trim little craft, and had just come down from the city to get a cargo of fish for the market, but so far had not caught more than a mess.

"Well, skipper, we have boarded you, you see, as we wish to run back to the city," said Pietro.

"Yes, señor," answered the skipper, who was a Spaniard, and with a negro and a small boy was all the crew the smack boasted of.

"We are willing to pay you well."

"It is worth the price of a week's fishing, señor."

"And that is how much?"

"Fifty pesos."

"That is little enough, and I will give you two hundred for the work I have in hand."

"You are generous, señor," said the delighted skipper.

"Yes, I know I am; it is one of my virtues to be generous when I have to be."

"Now I'll tell you what I want you to do."

"Yes, señor."

"You know the Pirate Isle?"

"Ah, yes, señor, for I have been robbed of my cargo several times by the coast buccanniers, so I know them but too well."

"They will not rob you now, skipper, as you have no cargo, and I will see that you are not disturbed."

"You do not mean that I am to take you there?" asked the skipper, in alarm.

"That is just what I do mean, and to be honest with you, I will tell you that we are sent to arrange ransom for some prisoners the Island Pirates have in their power, so that you will not be disturbed, as I go by appointment with their chief."

"Captain Curse, they call him."

"Yes, that is his name."

"He is a bad one, señor."

"I know he is; but as he holds captives near and dear to me, I must make terms with him."

"True, señor."

"And I will guarantee you against loss of your vessel and your liberty."

"Can you do so, señor?"

"Here, you see I have the money," and Pietro exhibited a roll of bills that made the eyes of the Spanish fisherman glisten with avarice.

"Yes, señor, and I am content," and the skipper at once called to his crew to aid him in setting more sail upon the little craft.

"I wish to arrive at night, skipper," said Pietro.

"All right, señor, it will be late when we get there."

The wind was light during the day, but at sunset it came on quite fresh, and the little smack glided merrily along.

"Better wrap yourself in your cloak, Senor Mortemas, and seek a little rest," suggested Pietro, and the fugitive planter did as directed, entering the little cabin and lying down upon a low settee that was there between the bunks.

"Let your black and the boy turn in too, skipper, and I will keep you company," said Pietro.

The negro and the youth were only too glad to accept this invitation, and at once they went below, and were soon snoring in blissful ignorance of what was going on above decks.

Seating himself near the skipper, Pietro said:

"Your son, I suppose, señor," referring to the boy.

"Yes, señor, and a good boy."

"He looks it."

"But the negro?"

"How, señor?"

"Does he belong to you, skipper?"

"No, señor, I hire him from his master."

"More likely he is a runaway negro, skipper."

"Come, I know something of life, and I guess the boy has run away and you give him a berth on board for his services."

"Isn't that so?"

"Tell me, for I will not speak of it."

"It is true, señor, he swam off to the smack one night, from a coast plantation, and has been with me ever since, and I hope will remain, for he is a smart fellow and very faithful."

"Had a cruel master, I suppose?"

"No, señor; he killed a rival, I believe, who had stolen his dusky lady love."

"Ah! what is his name, señor?"

"You mean him no harm, señor, I hope, for I would not have told you the truth about it if I had thought so."

"Oh no, I wish to befriend him."

"His name you said was—"

"I call him Afric, señor."

"A good name."

"But see, is that not a sail astern of us?"

The skipper quickly turned and it was the last act of his life, for deep into his back sunk a long, slender blade, driven by the powerful hand of Pietro.

With a low moan he sunk into a heap in the cockpit, while Pietro, still holding the smack on its course, with his knee against the tiller, very coolly raised the body and dropped it overboard.

"Ho, Pedro! Pedro!" called out Pietro.

It was the boy he called, and he came lazily out of the little cabin, rubbing his eyes.

"Pedro, my son, your good father wants you," said Pietro, and seizing the boy by the throat he drew him toward him, and the long blade entered his heart also.

Overboard the assassin dropped the body, to whirl about in the wake of the smack, and then once more he called:

"Afric! Ho, Afric!"

"Yes, massa," and the negro sprang upon deck, a tall, fine-looking fellow, though with a bold and cunning face.

"Afric, sit down there, for I want to speak with you," said Pietro.

The black obeyed, and then glanced about for the skipper and his son.

"Where ther cap'n, massa, and little Pedro?"

"They have turned in, Afric."

"They not in the cabin, massa."

"No, it was rather warm below decks, so they turned in into the Gulf."

The negro started to his feet in alarm, and asked quickly:

"What massa mean?"

"Keep cool, Afric, and hear me, for I mean to act for your good."

"I know all about you, and that you are a fugitive."

"But I will not betray you, as I want just such a man to be my slave."

"I will take you to the city, dress you well, feed you well, and you shall be my valet and confidential man."

"What do you say?"

"Yes, massa, but where am ther cap'n and Pedro?"

"I tell you that they got tired of life and went overboard."

"Dead, massa?" and the negro's eyes opened wide.

"I judge so, Afric, and you will do well to serve me."

The negro seemed to realize that he was wholly at the mercy of a very dangerous man. He had run away from his master, and having killed a fellow slave knew that death awaited him if he went back.

Here was a man that would do well by him, he said, and he believed him, and at once he knew it was to his advantage to serve the one who held the upper hand and he said:

"Yes, massa, I will be good nigger, and do all you tell me."

"All right, Afric."

"Now take the helm, for I hear my friend getting up—ah! Don Mortemas, you find the air of the cabin too close to sleep well, I suppose?" and Pietro turned to Mark Mortimer, who just then came on deck.

CHAPTER XIX.

A VILLAIN'S EXPLANATION.

WHEN Mark Mortimer descended into the small cabin of the smack, he threw himself upon the settee running athwart the deck.

The bunk of the skipper even did not tempt him, and he sought to gain a few hours of self-forgetfulness rather than rest.

But this he could not do.

The cabin was close, the settee hard and uncomfortable, and Afric snored like a bull.

Still the deck was too cool, and he struggled on to force sleep to come to him.

Yet it would not; and he heard the skipper and Pietro talking on deck, then he heard the call for the boy Pedro, and he awoke him and sent him out, little dreaming that he was sending him to his death.

Soon after the negro was called, and Mark awoke him also, only too glad to get rid of him and have the cabin alone.

But still he could not sleep, and rising impatiently he went on deck.

In answer to the question of Pietro, as to the closeness of the cabin, he said:

"Yes, it is too hot there, and too cool on deck; so I'll sit up."

"But where is the skipper?"

Pietro stepped toward him, and leading him forward, he said:

"Do you see that dark object far ahead?"

"I do; it is land."

"It is the Pirate Island."

"Ah! then you will run there in an hour's time?"

"Easily."

"But where is the skipper?" and glancing over the craft from stem to stern, Mark Mortimer continued:

"And the boy?"

"My dear Senor Mortemas, they have left the smack," said Pietro, pleasantly, yet in a low tone.

"Left the smack!"

"Why, what do you mean, Pietro?"

"Don't get excited, my dear señor, and I will explain."

"You see, señor, this smack is just what we want to run to the Pirate Island in, but the skipper comes every week or so to the city, and would have seen me there, or you, and recognized us, and then he would have discovered the fraud about ransoming a prisoner, and it would have taken gold to have silenced him."

"Then, too, I am economical, and I save where I can, so I just quietly let him drop over the stern."

"What?"

"And called the boy to follow him."

"Great God! You threw them in the sea to drown?"

"No; I killed them first, and then threw their bodies overboard."

"Pietro, you are the most cold-blooded assassin I ever knew; but the negro will report."

"Bah! he is a runaway, and more, a murderer, and I shall take care of him."

"No, it is all right, senor, so don't worry."

"I will take the helm now, Afric," and Pietro coolly walked aft, leaving Mark Mortimer horrified at his red deed.

Evil man though he was, he could not understand how Pietro could so coolly commit murder for so slight a cause as fearing to be recognized in the future by the fisherman, and also to save a few hundred pesos.

For a long time he stood in silence, leaning against the little mast, and lost in deep meditation; but suddenly he was reminded of where he was by the smack going about, and hearing Pietro call out:

"Look sharp, senor, for we are heading into the harbor now."

The smack was now near the Pirate Island, and gliding in between two headlands that jutted out into the Gulf, and formed a secure and safe harbor.

Lights were visible on the shore, around the little haven, and as the smack ran further in, full half a score of small craft were visible.

"Give me that lantern now, Afric," ordered Pietro, "or we may get a shot into us."

The negro stepped into the cabin and returned with the lantern, which Pietro took, and at once stepping forward, began to sway to and fro in half a circle, from a level with his right and left shoulders.

This he kept up steadily, while Mark Mortimer took the helm, until the little smack glided in among the other vessels then at anchor, and at once let fall her mud-hook.

"Ahoy! What smack is that?" called out a deep voice from a small schooner lying near.

"The Pietro, from New Orleans, and I wish to see the chief; so send me a boat, as I have none," answered Pietro.

"Ay, ay," came the reply, and soon after a boat ran alongside.

"Senor, I will go ashore and leave you in charge."

"I will be gone but a short while," said Pietro to Mark Mortimer, as he sprung into the boat.

Mark made no reply, and the boat moved shoreward, and watching Pietro, he saw him land and disappear in the gloom.

CHAPTER XX.

A PIRATE AND HIS GUEST.

THE boat that had come to take Pietro ashore contained two oarsmen and an officer, evidently, from his voice, the same who had hailed from the schooner.

Upon landing, the officer said:

"I will take you to the chief, senor."

"Thank you, but I know his quarters," and Pietro walked off alone.

The land sloped gently from the center of the island to the harbor, and half-way up to the top of the hill were a cluster of rude buildings.

As though acquainted thoroughly with the locality, Pietro walked toward the center one of these cabins, and from the windows of which a light glimmered forth.

Knocking at the door he was bid to enter, and he promptly accepted the invitation.

He found himself in a small cabin, with a door and windows upon each side.

There was only a dirt flooring, a few chairs, a couple of hammocks and a table, at which sat two persons, looking over some letters.

They were both dressed as sailors, and in a somewhat rakish uniform, and one was a dark-faced Spaniard, small in stature, and with a face that was most repugnant.

The other was a man with gray hair and mustache, and the look of a soldier, rather than a seaman, while he had that about him which proved he had not been reared to a life of crime.

The face of the latter was toward the door, and he glanced up as Pietro entered, and springing to his feet, cried pleasantly:

"Speak of the devil, and his imps will appear."

"What good wind blew you here at this moment, good senor?"

"Captain Curse, I am glad to see you, for I feared I might not find you at home," answered Pietro.

"Yes, I am here, senor, and this gentleman is a commander of one of my vessels."

"Captain Pablo, permit me to present the Senor Pietro, my friend."

The Spaniard bowed, and again resumed his work of looking over the letters upon the table, while the man known as Captain Curse said:

"Well, Pietro, we were busy looking over letters from my spies, and they report from Vera Cruz, Havana, Kingston and Pensacola, the sailing of well-freighted vessels due at the Delta soon, and I was just saying to Captain Pablo that I would post you, so that you might have your agents to receive large cargoes."

"They shall be ready, senor; but you grind me down so in commissions on the sales I make,

that I am hardly able to make an honest peso out of them."

"I'll trust you for not handling anything, Pietro, that you don't make gold out of."

"Why, senor, I have my crews to divide with, my vessels to keep in repair, and about every month some cruiser pounces down upon my island retreat here, and burns my cabins, steals my booty, and perhaps captures a vessel or two, while you have only yourself to look after, and no risks to run, so don't talk to me about low commissions."

"You draw the picture to suit yourself, Captain Curse; but we won't quarrel upon that score, for I came to see you upon a matter of business."

"How can I serve you, senor?"

"How many vessels have you?"

"My schooner that I command, Pablo's schooner, a lugger and three sloops," was the prompt reply.

"Have you a small and very fast craft?"

"I have, the lugger."

"I would prefer a lugger if she is a good sea-boat, can carry a large cargo, and is able to show her heels to a fast cruiser, if necessary."

"The lugger can do it, for she was built by a rich Cuban planter for his own use, and I won her at cards from him one night in Havana."

"I tell you she is a flyer, and, from your description of what you want, will just suit you; but what do you want with her?"

"I buy her for a gentleman, who wishes her for a trader."

"Good! and I will recapture her upon her first voyage, if my schooner can overhaul her, which I doubt."

"No; Captain Curse, for she goes as my craft for I will be part owner."

"Ah! that alters the question of course, for you know the old saying:

"Honor among thieves," and the pirate captain spoke with a sneer.

Pietro laughed lightly, and asked:

"What do you ask for the lugger?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"The price is too high."

"She is a beauty from stem to stern, keel to truck, and not a year old, for I won her on my last visit to Havana."

"I will not give the price."

"Call it eight then."

"I will give you five thousand cash."

"Don't be a Jew, Pietro."

"You have my offer," was the cold reply.

"And accept it."

"When do you want her?"

"To-night."

"She has a crew on board."

"Send them ashore, all but four men, whom I wish to help me run her up to the city."

"She has a cargo in her hold—"

"All right, I will give you what it is worth."

"Why in such haste?"

"Because cruisers are very fond of raiding upon your island, Captain Curse, and I do not care to be caught here."

"You are right; but how did you come?"

"I chartered a smack, and came with a companion and my negro servant."

"Will you buy the smack?"

"Certainly, for I need a little craft just now for a freighter, from the islands to the bayous, to meet the boats."

"What is she worth?"

"Five hundred pesos."

"I'll give you half that sum."

"I named my price, senor captain."

"All right then."

"Pay me the five thousand for the lugger."

"Four thousand five hundred, senor, as you take the smack."

"True."

"Now, tell me if it is true that Forrester the Freebooter is captured."

"No."

"So I thought, for he is too wary and brave a man to be caught by the girl that was chasing him, and my spies say his vessel went up the river, captured by her craft."

"Yes, he is a bold sea-rover, Captain Curse, while you and your captains haunt these shore lagoons, run for shelter when you see a cruiser, or a well-armed merchantman, even, and dare not go into deep water."

"True, Pietro, I am simply a pirate of the coast, and as long as it pays me I shall keep it up," and the outlaw showed no anger at the words of Pietro.

But not so with the Spaniard, Pablo, who rose to his feet and facing the man he considered had insulted him, said hoarsely:

"You'll eat those words, senor."

"I am not a man to retract, Senor Captain Pablo," was the cool response.

The Spaniard quickly seized his sword from where it lay on the table, and cried:

"Then you shall die with the lie on your lips."

As he uttered the last word there came the sharp report of a pistol, and Captain Pablo fell

* A network of lagoons extends along the southern coast of Louisiana, and in the days of piracy, the pirates could go in small boats almost up to the city of New Orleans.

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a corpse at the feet of his chief, while Pietro said in the calmest manner imaginable:

"You should teach your captains, senor, the courtesy due to a guest."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN APPARITION.

"You are remarkably ready with your pistol, Senor Pietro."

Such was the remark of Captain Curse, as he turned his gaze upon Pietro, who very calmly took a seat at the table, while he responded:

"I am not one to be taken unawares, Captain Curse."

"I have had proof of that; but allow me to thank you for doing me a service."

"In what respect, senor?"

"In killing the lamented Pablo, who lied before us."

"Ah! you wanted to get rid of him then?"

"Yes, for he was becoming troublesome, and I do not doubt was trying to undermine me with the band."

"He was a wicked devil, was too ambitious, wanted to take a large vessel and go on long cruises, and that I would not allow, for I am strictly a coast pirate."

"But let me have his body removed."

The old chief, as he spoke, placed a silver whistle to his lips and blew a long, shrill blast. A moment after a seaman entered.

"Doncaster, have that body removed."

"It is Captain Pablo, or what is left of him, and he attacked my friend and guest here and was killed."

"So report it to the men."

"Yes, captain," replied the man, and he disappeared to soon return with several comrades, who raised the body in their arms and silently bore it out.

"Doncaster!" called the chief.

"Yes, captain."

"Tell Lieutenant Dupree, of Pablo's schooner, that I make him captain in the place of his late lamented commander."

"Yes, captain," and Doncaster disappeared upon his errand.

"Now, Pietro, tell me what vessels were those that went up the river and my men mistook for the Lioness and Red Rover?"

"They were those vessels, senor."

"Yet you said but just now that Forrester had not been captured?"

"Nor was he."

"Ah! his vessel was taken then?"

"Yes, senor, and Captain Forrester was killed."

"No! Forrester the Freebooter dead?" and the face of the chief slightly paled, for it seemed to reflect his own fate.

"Yes, senor, I regret to say that Captain Forrester is dead."

"My dear Pietro, have a little more regard for truth, I pray you."

In spite of his wonderful nerve Pietro uttered a cry as the voice fell upon his ears, and both he and Captain Curse were on their feet in an instant, for before them stood none other than Forrester the Freebooter himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FREEBOOTER'S STORY.

"WELL, is this the welcome I get from old friends for, Pietro, I know you of old, and Captain Curse we have met before, I believe, when I kept a cruiser from capturing your little schooner by showing him my colors, and he preferred the larger game."

The man was tall, splendidly formed, with great broad shoulders, and looked a king among men.

His hair was dark, curling, and fell to his shoulders, and a long, waving beard fell nearly to his belt.

He was dressed in a sailor's suit, pea-jacket and hat, and about his head was bound a silk kerchief.

His face was pale, and showed evidence of suffering, but his eyes were dazzlingly bright and full of expression, though he wore an expression that was treacherous and cruel.

"By Neptune's head! but you are Forrester," said Captain Curse, stepping forward and offering his hand, which the pirate chief accepted, while he said with a smile:

"Yes, I am Forrester, wounded, without a vessel or crew, and come to claim your hospitality for a while, Captain Curse."

"You shall have it, for I have not forgotten the service you once rendered me, Captain Forrester."

"Nor that we are comrades in crime, my dear captain; but what ails you, Pietro, that you look so dumb, and have no word for me?"

"I was thinking!" was the reply.

"Is it such a rare thing with you as to make you seem half-dazed?"

"No, but I was thinking of the old adage as applied to you."

"Well, what is that?"

"You were not born to be drowned."

"No, nor hanged; but have you turned pirate that I find you here?"

"Oh, no, only on a visit to the senor captain here."

"But tell us, how did you escape, and accept my word for it that I am right glad to see you."

"Thank you, Pietro; but let me first sample some of the captain's good wine, and then I'll give you the yarn."

Captain Curse summoned the man, Doncaster, with a call upon his whistle, and refreshments and wine were brought.

"Now, Doncaster, order the crew of the lugger ashore, all but Dart and three men, and have those who came in on the little smack to-night go on board the Flying Feather, for that is the name of your new purchase, Senor Pietro," said Captain Curse.

Forrester, the Freebooter, ate with the relish of a hungry man, and after the wine had warmed him a little, he said:

"Of course you know I am believed to be dead, senors?"

"Yes; but I'll have to be at your burial before I believe such a story of you again, senor."

"I am hard to kill, that is a fact; but I had a close call this last time."

"Come, tell me where is my vessel?"

"In port."

"New Orleans?"

"Yes."

"And the other schooner?"

"The Lioness?"

"Yes."

"She is in port too."

"My men have been hanged, I suppose?"

"They will be, as soon as the Admiral returns to port."

"Ah! were any of my officers taken?"

"None."

"All killed! Well, that speaks well for them."

"Now, I suppose you wish to know why I am here?"

Both Pietro and Captain Curse bowed an affirmative.

"You see, I thought I had things my own way, for I had crippled my foe badly, boarded, and had driven them aft, although they fought well, and that girl fought like a tigress that she is."

"She had the reputation of having killed you."

"She certainly meant to do so, for there is her mark," and raising the kerchief from his head, he showed a wound extending back from the temple.

"The bullet glanced, however, and cut its way out, but it felled me as though dead, and some good fellows must have thrown me overboard, when the water revived me, and I struck out for the shore."

"Sufficient to know that I got there, by clinging to a yacht, my old smuggler craft, Jack-o'-lantern, and I was turned into the basin in front of the home of the very girl who had defeated me."

"I heard enough to know that that daring young planter, Percy Wyndham, saved the battle for my foe, as he came out in his yacht with his negro crew, so I owe him a debt I shall not neglect to pay," and the glitter in the man's magnificent eyes proved that he meant all that he said.

"I found a boat in the basin, so appropriated it, and hoisting the little sail, as soon as I got out of the basin, headed for the Rigolettes."

"I could have cut out better crafts from some of the plantations near, but feared pursuit, and near the Rigolettes, as I had expected, I found a fishing craft, and readily got its skipper to bring me along the coast."

"For gold, of course?"

"Certainly, Pietro, for men do not put themselves out for nothing."

"I told the skipper and his comrade that I was a planter, that had been blown to sea in my little boat, and they brought me around this side of the delta, and paying them well, I took to my little boat again, and came on here, and here I am, Captain Curse."

"And right glad am I to see you, Captain Forrester, and you shall have one of my small crafts as a start in life again."

"No, thank you, I merely wish to remain here until my wound heals, and it is my express wish that no one knows who I am, and I shall keep out of sight as much as possible."

"You, Pietro, can keep me posted of news in the city, what is to be done with my vessel and the Lioness, and have me a crew of a hundred men ready should I need them."

"I will, senor captain."

"And, Pietro, remember, not one word to a living soul of my escape."

"Certainly, if you so wish, senor."

"I do so wish, and demand," was the stern reply, and again pledging himself to secrecy, Pietro arose, and said he must go, for it was after midnight.

Captain Curse accompanied him from the cabin to the shore, where the lugger was found with sail up, ready to depart, though her anchor was yet down.

"She is a beauty," said Pietro, gazing at the lugger, which was in fact a vessel of rare symmetry of outline and capable of spreading a vast amount of canvas.

Bidding the coast pirate farewell, and promising to report all news in the city, upon his arrival, Pietro went on board the Flying Feather.

Mark Mortimer, grown very impatient at his long stay, was pacing to and fro, and met him at the gangway.

"This is our vessel, *Captain Marco*," he said, with an emphasis upon the new name he had given the young planter.

"So I thought, when orders came for Afric and myself to come on board."

"She is a wonder of symmetry and beauty, and her cabin is fitted up like a palace."

"I am glad she pleases you."

"Now, please get under way, and head for New Orleans," quietly said Pietro, and in obedience to his command, the Flying Feather turned her sharp prow for deep water.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PIETRO DRIVES A BARGAIN.

"Well, senor, what do you think of my purchase?"

Pietro asked the question of Mark Mortimer, as the latter stood at the wheel of the lugger, seemingly delighted at the manner in which she glided along, under pressure of an eight-knot breeze.

"I did not think a lugger floated that was her equal, senor, for she minds her helm as a horse does the rein, and she is flying along at a pace that is remarkable, for the little sail we have set."

"Then you are not afraid to trust her as your smuggling craft?"

"By no means."

"I wish you to be wholly satisfied."

"I am."

"And I will get you a good crew, men who understand their business, and half-a-score will be sufficient, for wages are high with seamen now."

"Yes, ten will be all I wish; but I need a good officer, and a boatswain who can act as second mate, if necessary."

"I know the men, senor, that I shall get for you."

"Well, what is your plan?"

"First, we will run up to the city and unload, for there is a part of a cargo on board I must dispose of for Captain Curse."

"And then?"

"I will put on board goods for Havana, which you are to run in without paying duty upon, you know, Captain Marco, and then load with a cargo which must dodge the revenue here."

"I understand."

"And my share of the profits?"

"Will be half, senor."

"I am content to try it, at least for a few trips; but if it does not pay me, I shall take to something else that will."

"Of course; and piracy is the thing to take to, for then one does not have to buy the goods, as you will have to do in smuggling."

"No; all is profit, except the debt one owes his own conscience."

"Don't talk of conscience, senor, for a man's conscience is what he allows it to be."

"Now, I have no such thing in my composition."

"The first sin I committed worried me so I confessed it, and I was sent to prison and put in the chain-gang for being such an accursed fool. That killed my conscience to such an extent that when the padre came to my cell to confess me, one evening, I simply choked him to death, put on his garb, and walked out of the prison, giving blessings as I went."

"And you were never captured?"

"No, indeed; for I was a handsome, slenderly-formed boy then, strange as you may think it now, and I put on petticoats and made my escape as lady's-maid to an old woman of title and wealth, and went with her to England, watched my chance, robbed her one night of her jewels and gold, and going into a second-hand clothing store, put on man's toggery once more and sailed for America."

"You certainly improve upon acquaintance, Pietro," sneered Mark Mortimer.

"Of course, senor."

"I would not give a piaster for a man you could see through at a glance."

"Now, any one would take you to be a gentleman and man of honor, to look at your face."

"Curse you, Pietro, you are most personal!" angrily said Mark Mortimer.

"Don't be sensitive, Captain Marco; but tell me what I gave for this beautiful craft?"

"You doubtless got it at a low figure from Captain Curse."

"You are mistaken. I paid a high price for it."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"She is worth it."

"I felt that you would think so, Captain Marco, and as it took all of my ready money, I will have to trouble you for your share."

"Ah, yes, you wish me to be half-partner with you."

"I do."

"Then I owe you five thousand dollars?"

"Just that sum, senor."

"Call Afric to take the wheel, and come into the cabin with me and I will pay you."

Pietro walked forward and told the negro to

go to the wheel, and then bade one of the four seamen to also go aft, while he added:

"Afric, as soon as we go into the cabin you give the wheel over to this man, and stand in the companionway to warn me if there is danger to me."

"Yes, massa," answered the negro; and Pietro, treacherous, deceitful, and an assassin himself, went into the cabin on his guard against an attack from Mark Mortimer, for he trusted no man.

But the money was counted out to him, and when Mark Mortimer returned to the deck the cunning Pietro muttered:

"I have made a good bargain, for I get a half share in the lugger for nothing, and counting my passage on the clipper ship as lost, I am yet in a hundred or so on the sale of the smack, after paying these four pirates for their services."

"I am in luck," and the man grinned with delight, for gold was the idol of his worship.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MYSTERIOUS LAUNCH.

A MAN OF WAR'S boat was pulling steadily up the swift current of the Mississippi.

There were ten oarsmen in the boat, and their blades rose and fell with the steadiness of machinery.

In the bows sat the coxswain, and at the tiller was a lieutenant, while by his side was seated a middy, who sung a lively air that chimed in well with the rise and fall of the oars.

The moon shone brightly down upon the river and dark shores, only now and then being obscured by passing clouds, and, but for the sweet tenor voice of the young midddy, the scene would have been dreary in the extreme in its silence and solitude.

Having finished his ballad, the midddy turned, glanced back down the river, and said:

"I hear oars, Lieutenant Larramour."

"It is the echo of our own blades, Vancouver," answered the lieutenant.

"No, sir, it is the rapid fall of oars, going at a livelier pace than we are."

"You are right, Harry; I hear them now."

"Perhaps a boat has been sent after us from the schooner," and the lieutenant turned to the oarsmen and said:

"Cease rowing, lads!"

The oars remained suspended above the water, and the boat glided on in dead silence, while every ear was bent to catch the slightest sound.

And all heard the quick, strong stroke of oars, while Lieutenant Larramour said:

"It must be the launch sent after us, for they pull more oars than we do."

"I will pull slowly until they overtake us."

"Give way, men, and with a slow, steady pull!"

The boat, which the current had already begun to set back, now moved forward once more, but at a slower pace than before, and soon after there appeared around the bend a long launch, urged on by a dozen oarsmen.

"It must be the launch," said Lieutenant Larramour, quietly.

"It may not be, sir, and this is a bad place for buccaners," suggested the midddy.

"Well, Vancouver, I have not been long enough on the Gulf station to know what you so do, who have been here for three years, so I ask shall we wait for them or pull on?" pleasantly said the lieutenant.

"I would say pull with a rush, sir, for they must see us, and if it was the schooner's launch they would hail us."

"True, Harry, so we'll go on."

"Give way hard, men!"

The boat now shot ahead rapidly, and made the waters foam about its bows.

But hardly had it gone a dozen lengths when it was seen that the launch was also increasing its speed.

"They are pursuing, sir."

"So I see, Harry, and we have a race for it, for she is crowded with men," answered Lieutenant Larramour.

As the pursuer still gained, the midddy called to the coxswain to take a blade, and, he seizing another one, they added their weight to the force, for the boat was pierced for ten oars.

This helped them a little, yet still the launch gained, and seemingly acquainted thoroughly with the river, its eddies and strongest currents, its helmsman steered a different course from that taken by the man-of-war's boat.

"They'll overhaul us, Harry," said Lieutenant Larramour.

"So it seems, sir."

"I will hail and find out who they are and what they mean by chasing a man-of-war's boat."

"Yes, sir, for we are pulling at our best, and can't keep up this killing pace long," answered the midddy, and he but echoed the sentiments of the men.

Turning his face full toward the pursuers, Lieutenant Larramour hailed:

"Aho! boat aho!"

No answer came, although the boat was a cable's length distant.

"Ho! the boat aho!"

Again the hail remained unanswered, and

angry at the slight, and determined to bring the pursuers to terms, the lieutenant said:

"I will tell them I will fire into them if they do not answer my hail."

"First hail them, sir, in Spanish," suggested Midshipman Vancouver.

"True, for it may be a Spaniard."

"But you will have to hail, Harry, as I am not up in Spanish."

Clear and loud rung out the midship's hail in Spanish, and it was twice repeated.

Still no answer was returned, and the boat drew nearer.

"Give them a chance in French, sir," cried the midship, and the lieutenant hailed in that language.

But the result was the same.

"I'll give them a hint now in solid old English, and if that brings no reply, I'll try what a shot will do," and, raising his voice, Lieutenant Larraamour called out:

"Ho, that boat! If you do not answer my hail, I will fire into you!"

No answer came, and the officer said, sternly:

"You two stern oarsmen drop your oars and take your muskets."

The order was promptly obeyed.

"Ready! Aim! Fire!"

The two muskets flashed together, and then followed a sound very like a groan, mingling with the thud of a bullet sinking into wood.

Yet still no answer came, and the boat moved on in silence, but faster than before.

"Lads, we are evidently their game, so all but you two bow oarsmen drop your blades and seize your arms."

"Midshipman Vancouver, you take the bow; Coxswain, stand amidstips, and I will remain here."

Then he continued, addressing the two oarsmen:

"Lads, pull steadily, just so as to keep her moving."

The pursuer was now heading directly for the man-of-war's boat, and not ten lengths away.

"Ready, men!"

The order was obeyed.

"Keep off there, or I fire into you!" shouted the lieutenant.

No answer was returned, and then came the stern order:

"Aim well, men."

"Altogether row, fire!"

The volley of musketry and pistol-shots rattled forth, and then came the shock, as the heavier boat ran alongside and grappled for a savage encounter.

CHAPTER XXV.

A VILLAIN'S DAUGHTER.

In one of the oldest streets of the city of New Orleans there still stands an old mansion that was there a century and a half ago.

It is in the Spanish style of architecture, and, when first erected, was the house of a grandee.

But it went from one generation to another, and was at last purchased for a small sum by a man who has figured in these pages in a very evil way.

Now the old structure is a kind of dilapidated tenement-house. But, at the time of which I write, Pietro, the then owner, in spite of its ancient appearance without, had a part of it within a perfect palace of luxury and beauty.

Upon the ground floor was a *cafe*, and above it were rooms that were rented, and there were those to accommodate the poorest seaman, or the rich man, who was willing to pay for comfort.

Then, too, there was a large hall upon the third floor, where were tables and chairs, which showed that it was a kind of social assembling room.

The rear wing of the house projected into a large garden, occupying the rest of the square.

The garden was walled in securely from all observation without, and kept in perfect order, while rustic arbors, a hammock or two, and numerous ornamental grottoes, made it a place of repose and beauty.

A door opened through the wall into the street beyond, and through that only was there egress and ingress to that portion of Pietro's mansion, for the doors connecting the rear wing of the mansion had been walled up.

The wing consisted of half-a-dozen rooms, four on the first floor and two on the second.

Those down-stairs consisted of a kitchen, dining-room, library and bedroom, the latter being occupied by Pietro, when that worthy visited that portion of his establishment.

The second floor had but two large rooms, one a perfect little paradise of a sitting-room and the other a sleeping-chamber, with a small servant's room attached.

Within this sitting-room, which was furnished most luxuriously, sat a young girl of sixteen, her fingers idly running over the strings of a Spanish guitar.

There was a piece of embroidery lying here, a half finished painting upon an easel near the window, a book opened upon the table, and every appearance that the fair occupant of the elegant home was not in a humor to remain long constant to any one occupation.

Her face was beautiful, and of the dark

Spanish type, her eyes full of passion and soulful expression, and her form perfection itself.

She wore a *robe de chambre* of a soft texture and of canary hue, and certainly looked very lovely as she sat there drumming upon her guitar.

Presently a woman entered, whose appearance indicated that she was a faithful domestic, for she was a quadroon, matronly and sedate.

"Ma'm'sel' Felice, supper is ready for you," she said, softly.

"I do not care for supper, Lizette, for I am all out of sorts because father did not come as he promised me he would," answered the maiden, in a spoilt kind of way.

"This is the season when your father is very busy, ma'm'sel', and he could not come doubtless," returned Lizette, speaking with an accent that showed her French origin.

"Ah! there the door opens now!"

"Yes, it is father!"

The maiden was glancing from the window across the garden, as she spoke, and had seen the door in the wall suddenly open and a man enter.

A glance was sufficient to show that it was Pietro.

But he was greatly changed, for he was dressed in a subdued kind of way, wore no flash jewelry as was his wont often to do, looked prompted up about the beard and hair, and seemed to have banished from his face much that was evil in it.

He had opened the wall door with his own key and closing it again, he came on rapidly toward the house, and was met at the door by Felice, his daughter.

And this young and beautiful girl was the one weak spot in the villain's nature, and his love for her the only redeeming trait.

He had saved her mother's life one day, when a runaway team would have dashed her to death.

He found her to be the daughter of an up-river planter, and he loved her desperately at first sight.

And more, assuming to be what he was not he won her love, urged her to fly with him and brought her to the city to dwell, in the very part of the old mansion where Felice then dwelt.

She had died in giving birth to her little girl, and the little Felice had been Pietro's constant care, and Lizette had been her nurse.

Every week the man was wont to go to the grave of his wife, and take his child with him, and upon that day he refrained from all acts of wrong doing.

And Felice was reared in blissful ignorance of what her father was, and did not know that he even owned the mansion of which her home formed a wing.

She had her carriage for a drive to the lake, or along the river road, when she cared to go.

She had her boats, her harp and guitar, her birds and other pets, but no acquaintances other than the French tutor who had taught her, and outside of her father Lizette was her only friend.

It was no wonder then that she welcomed him most warmly whenever he came near her.

Sometimes he would be days away, but only when his infamous business called him out of the city, for when in town he visited her daily, and often remained all night at the wing, she little dreaming that other nights he was within ten feet of her, only divided by thick and padded walls, for Pietro had shut off every sound from his daughter's ears.

I have said that there was no passageway between the wing in the garden, and the main structure in the street.

But there was, and it was known to Pietro alone.

It was a secret entrance through the garret of the wing, into his own room in the main structure.

He had had it made, and touching a spring opened the aperture in the wall, and this way he now and then went to and fro, when he felt there was no danger of Felice and the quadroon discovering him.

"Well, Felice, my child, did your old father disappoint you to-day?" he asked pleasantly, drawing her toward him, and wholly dropping his bitter, sinister manner in her presence.

"Yes, father, you did disappoint me sadly."

"But I forgive you now that you are here, and shall keep you all night."

"No, my child, duty calls me away to-night," and after an hour spent with his daughter, in which he was as different as daylight from darkness, compared with Pietro in his natural character, he departed, and wended his way around the square to his den of devilry in the other street.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PIETRO'S VISITOR.

As Pietro entered his den, as he called his money-making establishment, a servant who was serving out wine to customers in the *cafe* said to him:

"A gentleman to see you, senor, in your private office."

"Who sent him there?"

"I did so, senor."

"Who is he that you should dare to show him into my private office?"

The servant whispered a word in the ear of his master, who instantly said:

"Ah! that is all right."

Then he passed on into an inner room, where there was a table, a bed and a few easy-chairs.

One of the latter was occupied by a man apparently very old, for he had white hair and beard, and carried a stout cane.

"My dear captain, I am glad to see you," cried Pietro.

"Ha! how did you know me?" asked the other, straightening up with no air of old age about him to stiffen his joints and bend his back.

"Mier told me you were here."

"Yes, I went into the *cafe*, and not caring to remain in the crowd, called to him and told him who I was," answered the visitor.

"That was right."

"Now tell me when you arrived?"

"Last night, and went to Levi's and got this rig-out to hide my well known face."

"It is well you did, for though you are thought to be dead, you would be recognized, and they would be only too anxious to resurrect you, senor, just for the pleasure of hanging you."

"I know that, Pietro; but, tell me, did you receive my communication?"

"I did."

"And the men?"

"I have four-score ready now."

"Where are they?"

"In the social hall up-stairs."

"Good! You can trust them?"

"I trust no man, senor; but they are all errant rascals, and it is just such that you need."

"Well, I am glad you have them, and I'll soon make good men and true out of them."

"Yes, senor, as far as their seamanship and fighting qualities are concerned; but their morals can never improve under your teaching."

"None of your sarcasm, Pietro; but tell me if you have an officer or two for me?"

"There are several who might do, and you can make your own selection; but where is your vessel?"

"It lies here in port."

"Ah! you do not mean to seize your own schooner, which has been transformed into an honest vessel of war?"

"I intend to take that which is my own, Pietro."

"She has a crew on board."

"Not a large one, and I do not care for that, for I sail to-night in her."

"Well, I only hope you will succeed."

"But how is your wound?"

"Healed, yet I wear the scar and will until I die."

"On the yard-arm," laughed Pietro in his sinister way.

"As you please; but to-night I will be in a position to repay the debt."

"And you have been with Captain Curse all this time?"

"Yes, and he has treated me like a prince."

"That man was not intended for a pirate, Pietro?"

"He seems to fill the bill pretty well though."

"Yes, for having gone to the bad he has no other thing to do."

"He sent me up to the city in his launch, and none of his men knew me as Forrester, with my beard and hair cut off."

"You came up by oars then?"

"Yes, and I must tell you the story of my run up."

"The Lioness, also turned into a man-of-war, got aground in chasing the schooner of Captain Curse, and her captain dispatched a boat to the city for help."

"The thought struck me, for I was on the schooner with Captain Curse, that I would then come up to town, so he let me have his launch, twelve oarsmen, an officer and a coxswain, and I set out."

"Well, we overhauled the boat from the Lioness and the result is I captured her, after a sharp fight, and the launch lies hidden below the city, waiting for me to run down to-night."

"Were all killed?" dryly asked Pietro.

"No, I captured a midship and four men, and a lieutenant, coxswain, and four seamen were killed, for they made a desperate fight!"

"It is best to kill all, for silenced tongues never talk," was the cool reply.

"No, I felt differently."

"Now I wish you to rig out for a visit I have to make to-night."

"To whom?"

"The Governor-Commandante," was the cool response, and merry as he was, and a man to take desperate chances, he started and looked at the man before him with surprise and admiration, while he asked:

"Do you mean it?"

"I do."

"Be careful."

"You shall see what will be the result, Pietro," was the smiling response of the desperate man, in whom the reader has doubtless recognized Forrester the Freebooter.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FREEBOOTER'S RUSE.

THE Governor-Commandante sat alone in his library, smoking a fragrant Havana cigar, and sipping from a glass of wine that stood on a table at his elbow.

He seemed satisfied with himself and the world in general, for had not his administration been a just one, and one to be remembered?

He had hanged more than a score of pirates, and during his term the Skeleton Schooner and Red Rover, pirate vessels, had been captured, and the famous Freebooter Forrester had been killed, and thus a terrible blow had been given to piracy.

In the absence of the Admiral of the Gulf Squadron of American cruisers, he had sent several days before, the swift-sailing armed schooner, *Lioness*, on a cruise after the coast pirates, under their daring leader, Captain Curse.

Of late the coast pirates and lagoon robbers, as they were also called, had been most troublesome, capturing several richly freighted vessels.

But the *Lioness* had divided her crew with the captured pirate craft Red Rover, which had been rechristened the *Corsair*, and the Governor did not wish to send a small force against the Barrataria Buccaneers.

A small number of sailors, however, under a lieutenant, arriving from the North in a packet ship, the Governor had at once ordered them on board the *Lioness* and sent the fleet vessel to hunt down Captain Curse, and he was sitting there in his library, hoping for good news from the schooner, when he is presented to the leader.

"A gentleman to see you, sah," said a negro butler in livery, entering the library.

"Who is he, Hannibal?"

"Loot'nent Larrymer, sah, he give his name ter me."

"I do not remember such a name: but show him in, Hannibal?"

Hannibal promptly obeyed and there entered a tall, splendidly formed man in the dress of a naval lieutenant.

His face was darkly bronzed and his mustache was very heavy and the ends long and twisted upward.

"The Governor-Commandante, I believe?" he said politely and with a bow, while his manner was courtly.

"Yes, sir; and I did not exactly catch your name from my butler's pronunciation of it."

"Larramour, sir, Lawrence Larramour, and a lieutenant in the navy."

"Ah, yes! You were the officer that came from the North with that batch of seamen, I believe, and whom I ordered off to reinforce the crew of the *Lioness*."

"I am, sir."

"Be seated, please, and join me in a glass of wine."

The lieutenant accepted both invitations, drank the Governor's very good health, and then said:

"I suppose you are anxious to know the result of our cruise, Governor?"

"I am indeed, sir; but first let me say that I was sorry to have to order you and your men on board the *Lioness* the very hour of your arrival; but the fact is, the *Corsair*, as we now call the schooner of that late sea-devil, Forrester, was short-handed, and as it is there's only a junior officer or two and a score of men on board of her now."

"Oh! I did not mind going, sir, for it is a sailor's duty to be ready to obey at all times."

"But we met with a misfortune on the *Lioness*, Governor, and I have come to report it and to ask for the *Corsair*."

"Pray, sir, what misfortune could have happened you?" asked the Governor, anxiously.

"We were chasing Captain Curse, sir, in his little vessel, and he led us across a bar, over which he glided easily and we struck."

"Aground!"

"Yes, Governor, and must remain there until we get the guns off."

"The *Lioness* is not hurt, sir, materially; but Captain Dunstan sent me by boat at once to the city to request that you let me bring the *Corsair* down to her aid with all speed, and then the two vessels can move upon the Pirate Island, for I set a midshipman and the coxswain of my boat to shipping about half a hundred men as soon as I arrived, an hour ago."

"You are prompt, sir, I am glad to see, and you shall have the schooner; but I doubt if you can get good men."

"I will do the best I can, sir, under the circumstances, and it is my desire to sail at once."

"You shall do so."

"Go at once on board the *Corsair* and tell—"

"Pardon me, Governor, but I am wholly unknown to the officer in command, sir, having, as you know, just arrived from the North."

"True. I will give you a line to him."

The "line" was hastily written, the official seal put upon it, and after another glass of wine with the Governor, the lieutenant took his leave.

Taking a boat, he rowed out to the schooner, presented his letter, and the officer in charge

welcomed him cordially, and seemed delighted at a chance to go pirate-hunting.

The schooner was at once gotten under way and run down to a point a mile below, where Lieutenant Larramour said Midshipman Vancouver and the coxswain were to meet him with the volunteer seamen.

As the vessel put inshore they saw a crowd of men upon the bank, and instantly they jumped on board, there was a short struggle, and the officer of the *Corsair* and his men were prisoners, while Forrester, the Freebooter, once more trod the deck of his gallant craft, and had under his command four-score daring, desperate men.

Running down the river to the point where the launch was concealed and waiting, the schooner made a landing, and the prisoners were bound and placed in the man-of-war's boat of Lieutenant Larramour, while Forrester, the Freebooter, said, addressing the officer:

"Lieutenant, you are free now to return to the city with your men, and pray say to the Governor-Commandante that I enjoyed my visit to him greatly, his wines are excellent, his cigars most fragrant, and that he has the best wishes of Forrester, the Freebooter, for his courtesy in giving back to him his dear old vessel."

Then with the launch of Captain Curse in tow the schooner flew on down the river, leaving the astounded officer and men that had been in charge to hear the story of Midshipman Vancouver about the attack upon them as they ascended the river, and how the daring pirate chief had determined to play the part of Lieutenant Larramour, when he discovered that that officer was unknown to the Governor.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DIVIDING THE SPOILS.

AGAIN we find Pietro in his private room, but alone, and figuring over his accounts.

It was evidently a pleasing occupation as he went over the profit and expense columns, for his eyes glittered with avarice and delight.

"Well, well," he said.

"I am a rich man; yes, a very rich man, and I will be able to leave my darling child a cool million when I die."

"Little will she dream that every *peso* I leave her has cost a groan and a tear, and never shall she know."

"But then how many sensitive natures would shrink from the touch of gold if they knew what it had bought before it came into their possession."

"Talk of pure gold, why no gold or silver is pure if you judge it by what it is used for."

"Ha! ha! but Felice does not know, and never shall know that her father is a villain."

"It was a bright thought of mine to set Mark Mortimer to work, and he has reaped a rich harvest for himself as well as for me, and I will now see that he makes a fortune at one bold stroke."

"He has grown strangely bold of late in his cruises, and runs that lugger into all kinds of dangers, but extricates himself superbly."

"Well, this shall be his last voyage until he gets the fortune I have in store for him, and then if he runs through with that, as he doubtless will, for gambling is his curse, why then he can take to piracy, and I would be willing to fit him out in a vessel."

"Ah me! I wish that I could marry Felice to some noble man, to care for her when I am gone, for I feel that I shall not live much longer, as this trouble here increases," and he placed his hand over his heart.

"Now," he resumed his low, monotonous talking to himself:

"Now, I know of no man I would select for Felice whom I could respect as I do that planter of Lakelands."

"He is young, handsome, fearless as a lion and true as steel."

"Rumor has it that he loves the daughter of the man he killed, and that she loves him, and that that is why Mark Mortimer went away from his native land."

"But rumor is sadly off in regard to Mark Mortimer, and may be as far as this love-talk about young Wyndham and the Senorita Mortimer is concerned."

"I will find out how the wind blows, and if he does not love the heiress of The Everglades, I will just arrange that he and Felice shall meet."

"She can win his love at sight, and he'll not know Senor Pietro Paulo, her father, as Pietro, the Italian, and once they love each other and are engaged, I'll fix my wealth in gold, and so that no one will know how it was earned, and then I'll just end this life I lead here and seek another land, never to return, and not remain near them to darken their young lives."

"Ah! Afric, is that you?"

"Yes, massa," and Afric, the runaway negro of the fishing-smack, entered the room.

He looked spruce in a suit of livery, had a more contented look upon his face, and had been added to the household of Felice as a man-of-all-work, but principally was of use to his master, whom he both feared and was attached to.

"What is it, Afric?"

"The lugger comed in, sah."

"Ah! the Flying Feather has then arrived?" said Pietro, gleefully.

"Yes, massa."

"I seen her come up de ribber, an' drop anchor, sah, so I comed to tell you."

"Then Captain Marco will soon be here, so tell the Senorita Felice I will not be home to dinner to-day."

"Yas, massa," and Afric disappeared, while Pietro went on with his musings until again interrupted by the appearance of a tall man in sailor garb and white hair and beard.

"Ah! Captain Marco, you are most welcome."

"Be seated and join me in some wine, while you tell me of your news."

The visitor grasped the hand extended to him, threw himself into a chair, and said:

"Well, Pietro, this is my last smuggling cruise, and it is the best paying one of all."

"Glad to hear that, Captain Marco, and now I can give you more agreeable work to do as I promised."

"Yes, I have borne that promise in mind; but do you think I am sufficiently changed in appearance not to be recognized?"

"Certainly, even when you wash the white off of your hair and beard."

"The truth is you have naturally a fair complexion; but I have a solution, or dye, that will give it the exact Mexican tinge."

"Your hair has grown out beautifully and your beard is majestic, and in the attire you are to wear no man on earth will ever suspect you of being Mark Mortimer, who hired me to kill his sister, half a year ago."

"By Heaven! Pietro, why bring up that accursed remembrance?"

"Because now it can be done surely, and in time you can get your just inheritance; but to the work in hand now."

"Your last run was from Havana, I suppose?"

"Yes, and the lugger is full of rich freight, with logwood and mahogany on top."

"Good! I'll take her off your hands at once, and, as soon as she discharges her freight, will sell her."

"Now let me see."

"What did the cargo cost you?"

"Ten thousand dollars; here are the bills."

"Correct, I will not look over them, for, bad as you are, my dear captain, you are certainly no thief."

"Well, the cargo is worth here double that sum, so you get back your ten thousand."

"Then there is the profits from the last three cruises that are not settled for, which causes me to pay you just twenty-three thousand dollars."

"And you have some ten thousand of mine on deposit."

"Yes, making thirty-three in all."

"And my share of the lugger, which you are to sell?"

"True, I had forgotten that."

"Yes, your memory is sometimes poor," sneered Mark Mortimer.

"Oh no, for I think I have done well by you."

"Certainly, I take all the risks and make some thirty-three thousand dollars, and you get the lion's share with no risk."

"But I am content, so give me my money."

"Ah! but you forget that I have other work for you to do," and Pietro smiled most blandly.

"Well, we will talk of that afterward."

"Now pay me the profits, and my five thousand dollars on the lugger purchase back, and then tell me the news."

"There is startling news."

"Indeed! give it to me at once, for I have heard nothing for two months," and Mark Mortimer threw himself back in his chair with the air of a man ready to hear anything.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A STARTLING PROPOSAL.

"Now, Pietro, I am ready for your news," said Mark Mortimer again, and Pietro remained silent.

"Well, it is startling."

"Has my sister married that accursed Wyndham?"

"No, it is more startling than that, senor."

"I cannot surmise anything worse?"

"It is good news, Captain Marco."

"Then out with it."

"Did you meet a schooner going down the river?"

"Yes, a number of them."

"Any one in particular?"

"Yes, the old Red Rover, the schooner that had been Forrester's, but is now a cruiser."

"I gave it a wide berth."

"Ah! you did well, for Forrester was its captain."

Mark Mortimer was upon his feet in an instant, his face livid, while he cried in a loud tone:

"Come, I am not one to trifle with, Pietro."

"Nor I one to trifle, Captain Marco."

"Why I saw Forrester fall dead—"

"Ha! you saw him die, senor Mortimer?"

"You did not tell me of this before."

Mark Mortimer saw that he had betrayed himself; but he had nerved himself to control himself of late, and with great presence of mind said quickly and in the same tone:

"Yes, I saw him fall, for I was on the headland near my home, off which the combat between the two vessels occurred, and with a powerful glass I beheld all."

"Ah!" said Pietro quietly, deceived by the quick explanation.

"And therefore there is no need of telling me that Forrester lives."

"But I do tell you so."

"I would not believe it unless I had seen him."

"Senor, Captain Forrester did fall severely wounded and senseless, and he carries a bad scar on his temple to-day."

"He was thrown overboard as dead, the cool water revived him, and he has been hiding until he was perfectly well and could plot his seizure of his vessel once more."

"Two nights ago he came to the city, boldly got control of his schooner by an accident, and has set sail to once more raise the flag of the free rover."

"Can this be true?"

"It certainly is, for I shipped his crew for him, and was the last to grasp his hand with a *bon voyage*."

"A *bon voyage*?"

"Curse him! I hope he'll voyage straight to the depths of Hades," savagely said Mark Mortimer, who was greatly crushed by this news, as he feared that he would be again persecuted by the Freebooter.

"You do not love him, senor?"

"No."

"Once we were friends, but that was when he lived here."

"Tell me, did you speak of me to him?"

"I did not, for I never speak of one man's business to another."

"And he believes me dead?"

"That I do not know, senor."

"Well, this is strange news and I suppose the city is wild over it?"

"Yes, senor, and the Governor, whom Forrester called upon, is ill with rage," and Pietro told of the Freebooter's ruse and his visit to the Governor-Commandante.

"Now, Pietro, what is it you wish of me?"

"I will tell you, senor."

"And I will listen most attentively."

"To begin, senor, you are a very handsome man."

"Thank you."

"You have a superb form."

"Again I vow my thanks."

"Your eyes are most expressive and your manners courteous and fascinating."

"Look here, Pietro, you are worse in giving blarney than an Irishman to the manor born."

"To what does all this tend?"

"You shall soon know."

"I confess I am impatient."

"You speak Spanish perfectly, senor, as I know, and under a new guise your own sister would not know you."

"Well?"

"Now tell me if you are a married man?"

Mark Mortimer started, and the keen eyes of Pietro saw it.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I have a motive."

"Don't fear to tell me everything."

"Well, I will tell you frankly, Pietro, I met Bessie Gito—"

"Ah! the one who was known as Captain Bess?"

"Yes, and as Buccaneer Bess, and the Pirate Huntress, too."

"It was she that ran Forrester to what was believed the end of his rope."

"And she is your wife?"

"I entered into a mock marriage with her, and somehow that accursed Wyndham found it out."

"This is growing interesting, senor."

"Did you hear of my duel with Wyndham some time ago?"

"I did."

"It was a drawn affair."

"It was no such thing."

"I wanted to meet him and end the vendetta with his death so was glad to get a chance to fight him."

"He appointed a place down the river as the field, went there in his yacht, and his second was the Admiral."

"I knew he was a dead shot; so I managed to have swords as the weapons, as I had never met my equal."

"Bahl! He played with me, held me at his mercy, and forced me to marry Bessie Gito; for he had a priest on his yacht, where were also the girl and his mother."

"He was honorable enough not to speak of it, I admit; let the duel be called a draw, and now you know why I have another cause for hating him, for he humiliated me, and would have killed me had I not married the girl."

"Well, this is strange news, and I find one more reason to admire Mr. Wyndham."

"But what was the girl to him?"

"Nothing; but she had in some way saved his life, or his mother's, I believe."

"Ah! that accounts for it."

"But your marrying a second time will make no difference."

"I am no bigamist, Pietro."

"You need not be, for it was the Senor Mark Mortimer who wedded Bessie Gito, and it will be Don Marco Mortemas who will marry the lady I have in view."

"Pietro, you are a fool."

"Not such an one as I look, senor."

"What is this plot for me your wicked head has concocted, for in spite of myself I am interested in it?"

"Are you acquainted with Miss Violet Vassar?"

"Yes; I have met her in society a year ago."

"What do you think of her?"

"A very pretty and amiable girl."

"She has money?"

"Yes; a small inheritance, I believe. But not enough to tempt a man into matrimony."

"She has it all in her own right?"

"No I have heard; her father left it for her."

"That is good."

"Yes, for what it amounts to."

"Senor, Miss Vassar's property has lately increased in value one thousand per cent."

"Indeed! How did this happen?" asked Mark Mortimer with greater interest.

"Well, it seems there was some land her father owned in the city, which was taken from him illegally, and she has won it back, and is now the wealthiest girl in this part of the country."

"Well, what has this to do with me?"

"Simply, senor, if I arrange it so that you can marry that girl, will you pay me down the day of your wedding, twenty-five thousand dollars."

"I will."

"Give me your note of hand to that effect."

Pietro placed a quill, bottle of ink and paper before him, and said:

"Write!"

"Proceed to dictate."

"I, Mark Mortimer, under the alias of Don Marco Mortemas, the millionaire Mexican—"

"Bahl! What is all this trash?"

"Write as I dictate, senor."

Mark Mortimer again seized the pen, and Pietro continued dictating while he wrote:

"Do hereby pledge to pay into the hands of Pietro Paulo the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars in gold the day upon which my marriage with Mademoiselle Violet Vassar is consummated."

"Now sign it, senor, both as Mark Mortimer and also as Don Marco Mortemas."

With a light laugh the Corsair Planter did so, and then said:

"Now your plot, Pietro."

"It is for you to sail in the lugger for Vera Cruz, and then return from there in a packet ship."

"Secure there a Mexican valet, and come to New Orleans as Don Marco Mortemas."

"I will see that you get into society at once, and spend the gold you have freely."

"Then seek the hand of the Senorita Vassar, and her guardian, whom I know well, will urge your suit, and you can get her fortune."

"I do not want a wife, Pietro, but I do crave her fortune."

"That is easy enough to arrange, senor, for she may die, you know, and you can return to Mexico, while during your stay here as the Don, your sister might very naturally fall sick and death overtake her; and you, returned from foreign lands as yourself, could claim your just inheritance."

"Now, senor, what of my proposal to you, I ask?" and Pietro smiled as sweetly as though he had not planned a most diabolical plot.

"I think, Pietro, so much of it that I accept the consequences, be they what they may," was the reckless response.

"Good! Now, Don Marco Mortemas, we will get the cargo out of the lugger at once, and I will put a sailing-master on board to run the craft back from Vera Cruz."

CHAPTER XXX.

A LOVE SCENE.

DURING the months that have passed since we left Bessie Gito and Binnacle Ben nursing by the bedside of Raoul Langdon, few changes have come to that quiet household and the aristocratic denizens of The Everglades and Lakelands.

With the supposed death of Forrester the Freebooter, and the self-exile, as it was also believed by Mrs. Wyndham and Mabel, of Mark Mortimer, peace had fallen upon the shore.

Raoul Langdon had slowly recovered from his fearful wound, and after a couple of months was able to sit up, and then to go with Bessie and Binnacle Ben for a sail, or with the maiden for a row in her lightskiff, for the old tar had gotten all the cottage boats again in the water and ready for use.

Percy Wyndham also went over often to Cliff

Cottage and enjoyed many a chat with the young naval officer, trying to cheer him all in his power.

Percy had written to his captain for him, explaining matters fully, and had received a pleasant reply, with regrets at the wounding of his lieutenant, and sympathy, but telling him to take his own time in getting well and rejoining the ship and to keep up a cheerful heart.

Raoul Langdon also, as soon as he was well enough, sailed over to Lakelands, and accepted the pressing invitation of Mrs. Wyndham and Percy to visit them, for he appreciated that it was better that he should not remain at Cliff Cottage now that he was able to depart.

Binnacle Ben was given the situation of Head Boatman at The Everglades, as Mabel was but too glad to have a white man on the place as a protector.

She had built for him a cosy cottage on the shore, and "Captain Ben," as he was then called, was in clover and knew it too.

All seemed to regret that Bessie would remain alone at Cliff Cottage; but she was firm in her resolve, and at last Mrs. Wyndham sailed over to see her one day and urged her to make Lakelands her home.

But Bessie was obdurate, said she wished to live in solitude, and went back to her lonely retreat.

Mabel Mortimer she had not seen since her return, and neither cared to meet the other on account of the painful thoughts that such a meeting would give rise to, though the lonely girl felt no ill will toward the heiress of The Everglades, on account of the murderous act of her brother.

Once had Raoul Langdon accompanied Percy to New Orleans in the Jack-o'-lantern, and the cruise did a great deal to benefit him.

And a second time he expected to go and then take a packet ship for the North.

But he had a slight relapse, and Percy was forced to sail without him, as he had business there that could not be postponed; but he promised Raoul Langdon that after his return he would take him to the city via the Mississippi River, and that his mother and Mabel would also accompany them.

As Percy had become a constant visitor at The Everglades, the young lieutenant, who also visited Cliff Cottage quite often, had been wont to go in the boat with the master of Lakelands, leave him at the pier as he went along, and continue on to see Bessie, stopping for his host upon his return.

With Percy gone to New Orleans, Raoul Langdon was forced to go alone, and one pleasant day, after having read to Mrs. Wyndham and Mabel during the morning, he got into the little cat-rigged sail boat and headed for Cliff Cottage.

As he gained open water he saw afar off a vessel heading for the coast at that point, apparently intending to run into one of the three harbors along the shore.

On he went to the Cliff Cottage haven, ran in, and, grounding his boat, ascended to the little house where he had known so much of suffering.

Bessie, busy with some household duties, had not seen his boat coming, and he surprised her just as she had completed her task and was coming out to sit on the little porch, as was her wont.

"I am glad to see you, Lieutenant Langdon," she said, in her honest way, and placing an easy-chair for him.

"Don't wait on me, Miss Bessie, for I am not an invalid now," he said, flushing as he spoke.

"I really think you are almost your old self again; but see, what vessel is that?"

She pointed to the sail which Raoul Langdon had before noticed, and now that he was upon the headland, and had a better look at the craft, which had drawn a league nearer in the mean time, he said, quickly:

"Why, that is the Red Rover, Miss Bessie."

He saw her face turn pale, and hastily added: "You know she has been made into a cruiser, and is now named the Corsair."

"Yes, Mr. Wyndham told us she was now a Government vessel; but what can she want coming here?"

"I will tell you, Miss Bessie."

"My last letter from my captain said that if a vessel, one of the Gulf fleet, did not come for me during this month, then I should go to New Orleans and take the packet ship to New York, and I feel that yonder craft is putting in here for me, as she is now one of the Southern squadron."

"How strange that that vessel should come for you above all others, Lieutenant Langdon."

"True; but strange things do happen in this world, Miss Bessie."

"Well, within an hour's time you will know."

"Yes, within an hour's time I will have to say farewell to you, Miss Bessie, and when I tell you that wherever I go my heart will be ever here in this little cottage with you, I know that you will believe me."

"I know it, Bessie, because you have seen that you alone could have nursed me back from the brink of the grave."

"With all the sorrow upon me I longed for death, and when I stepped between you and the

blade of that pirate officer, I was glad to offer up my life for you.

"For your sake I struggled hard to live, and to win your love has been my only hope.

"Tell me, Bessie, if I must leave you now forever, or if I can come back here one of these days soon, and claim you for my bride.

"I am rich, Bessie, and in the far-away Northland I have a lovely home, where lie the bones of my murdered parents.

"But, if you wish it, I am willing to come here to live, and I will build you here a home that will rival Lakelands, and for the remaining days of my life I will devote myself wholly to you.

"Speak, Bessie, for I have no more to say, and I await your answer."

He had spoken in a low, earnest voice, and arising, had stood before her, looking down upon her.

She had remained seated, her head bent, her form trembling, and her face very white.

When he had ceased speaking she made an effort at self-control, and rising, faced him.

Upon each of his shoulders then she placed one of her small, shapely hands, and said, in a tone low, tremulous, yet perfectly distinct:

"Raoul, listen to what I have to say:

"You ask for my love, and I say frankly to you that all the love I have to bestow, you have—nay, hear me.

"I loved my father with an idolatrous worship, and I knew no other affection in my girlhood days, until one day a serpent crossed my path.

"Instead of strangling it, I allowed myself to be fascinated by it, and, mistaking fascination for love, I became, as I believed, the wife of that man whom I have called a serpent.

"He bade me keep the ceremony a secret, and I did so; but in time I soon saw him with the mask torn off, and I hated where I believed I had loved.

"More, I found that he had cruelly wronged me, for his own lips told me that the ceremony I had gone through with him was but a mock marriage."

"Oh, God!" burst from the set lips of the young seaman.

Then Bessie continued:

"But one whom I love as dearly as I could my own brother proved my friend.

"He knew my sad story, and, with his mother as my friend, forced that man to make me his legal wife in his presence.

"The marriage was performed by a priest, and then my more than brother bade the wretch begone, and we parted.

"That one who befriended me was Percy Wyndham, and he who deceived me so cruelly was the man who gave you the wound meant for me.

"Now, Raoul, you know the story of my life, and when, in the deepest secrecy I tell you that he was the murderer of my father, you will understand why I became the revengeful being I was when you knew me as Captain Bess, the Pirate Huntress.

"My father, Raoul, was of noble Spanish blood; but he became involved with Forrester, the Freebooter, and to give me an education and every luxury, I fear sinned greatly.

"Forrester believed that my father betrayed him, when I was the one who piloted Percy Wyndham to where his vessel lay hidden, and the Freebooter sought to revenge himself upon Juan Gito and his daughter.

"Death stepped between the Freebooter and my father, and I turned like a tigress upon the track of those who had wronged me and mine.

"Now, Raoul, you know who it is that you ask to become your wife."

She dropped her hands from his shoulders and stood silently before him, as though awaiting judgment.

"Bessie, misfortune is not crime, and I say to you again that I love you.

"I say to you gain, be my wife, Bessie."

She raised her glorious eyes to his face, and he drew her toward him with a cry of joy that came from his inmost heart.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEPARTURE.

So wrapt up were the two loves in their lovers, that they had almost forgotten the coming vessel, until Raoul Langdon, recalled to himself, suddenly glanced seaward.

The schooner had drawn close inshore, and was heading for an anchorage off Lakelands, there not being water enough on the bar for her to run into the little harbor.

"See, Bessie, it is as I have said, the schooner has come for me, for I sent word to the Admiral I would be at Lakelands," cried Raoul Langdon.

"Yes, there can be no doubt of it, for there flies the American flag at the peak; but somehow, Raoul, I do so hate to have you go in that vessel."

"And so do I, Bessie, for it was the craft I commanded while playing pirate, and upon which my poor sister Kate acted as cabin-boy, and it can but call up the saddest memories."

"And more, Raoul; it was the vessel of Forrester the Freebooter, and that other nameless person.

"But I suppose I must give you up?"

"Yes, but I shall resign my commission, get my home in order in dear old Maine, as you say you prefer to live there to here, and within three months I shall return to claim my bride."

"I will be ready, Raoul."

"And Mr. Wyndham shall give the bride away, and I know his noble mother will be only too glad to be as a mother to you, for she has told me so."

"Yes, she will be a good mother to me, Raoul, and I love her as such."

"And you will go there to stay until my return, for I would be so unhappy to feel that you were here all alone?"

"I will do just as you wish, Raoul."

"Why, what an obedient little girl you are! Now good-by for awhile."

She followed him to the shore, saw him off in his boat, and retreating to the Headland watched the little craft until she saw it run into the harbor of Lakelands, whither a boat from the schooner had preceded it.

The schooner had come to anchor, but with her foresail and mainsail still set, and the boat that rowed inshore Bessie felt assured had gone to acquaint Raoul with the fact that the cruiser had come for him.

As the cruiser had anchored some distance off from the harbor, Raoul Langdon headed directly for the pier, and upon his arrival there found a young officer, in the dress of a junior lieutenant, just coming down from the mansion.

His boat, with a coxswain and four oarsmen, was at the pier, and upon their caps was embroidered:

"Corsair—U. S. N."

As he sprung up the water-stairs, he was greeted by the young officer with:

"Is this Lieutenant Langdon of the Navy?"

"I am, sir," said Raoul, returning the salute given him.

"I am Lieutenant Seawaif, sir, of the Navy, and first officer of the Corsair, and my instructions are to inform you that the admiral has ordered the schooner North, and instructed us to call for you to give you an opportunity of going with us."

"I thank you, Lieutenant Seawaif, and if you will return with me to the mansion I will detain you but a minute in getting ready."

"I regret that Mr. Wyndham is also not at home, as his hospitality is world wide."

The young officer returned with Raoul Langdon to the mansion, where Mrs. Wyndham and Mabel, who was visiting Lakelands, entertained him while their departing guest was getting his luggage together.

The ladies found Lieutenant Seawaif a most charming young gentleman, though he wore a look of thorough dissipation which was accounted for by the way he disposed of glass after glass of brandy, for he had preferred that to wine when asked as to his choice of liquors.

Mrs. Wyndham bade her guest farewell with the greatest regret, and, with Mabel, walked down to the pier with the two officers, where Raoul Langdon found that hampers of wines and delicacies had been prepared by his kind and faithful hostess for his use on board ship.

As Raoul accompanied Mrs. Wyndham in the walk, he had an opportunity of informing her of the engagement of himself and Bessie Gito, and that lady knew not what to say, for though she was aware that the young girl believed that her evil husband was dead, yet she knew that he still lived.

But she wisely refrained from saying anything to wound the heart of the young lieutenant, deciding that Percy would be the one to set things right when he knew what had occurred.

With sad farewells Raoul Langdon entered the waiting boat with his brother officer, and was rowed seaward.

Watching him, as was Bessie also on the fir-off headland, they saw him mount the schooner's side, and immediately after the beautiful vessel stood off on her course, and, as darkness was near at hand, soon after disappeared from the sight of the watchers.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NIGHT COMBAT.

THE honored guest had gone from Lakelands, and Mrs. Wyndham and Mabel sat in the library after tea, discussing his merits, and wishing him every joy, for there was that about Raoul Langdon that endeared him to all who knew him.

Suddenly they started to their feet, for the deep boom of a heavy gun fell upon their ears, and so near that it shook the windows.

Ere they could reach the door to see the cause, there followed two more distinct reports in rapid succession, and then all was still for an instant.

Upon reaching the piazza they found the negroes hurrying from their homes, and old uncle Toby cried:

"It was right off there it flashed, mistis, near Cliff Point."

Ere reply could be made there were seen rapid flashes, evidently from smaller arms, and then was heard the reports and loud cries.

There was but little wind, and that was from

the direction of the combat, whatever it was, and distinctly could be heard the shouts of combatants, rattling of pistol-shots, and even the clash of steel against steel.

"Oh, heaven have mercy! what can it be?" cried Mrs. Wyndham.

"There is such a light wind, Mrs. Wyndham, the cruiser may have encountered some foe before she got far away," returned Mabel.

"But what foe, Mabel, for we are at war with no nation?"

"True, and it can only be a pirate she has met."

"I am so glad that Percy is away, for instantly he would go there, as he did in the other combat."

Mabel also was glad that the dashing young planter was well out of that trouble, and then all stood straining their eyes to see if they could discern if it was the cruiser by the flashes of the firearms.

But this they failed to do, though they could see that two vessels were lying side by side, and that it was a hand-to-hand conflict upon the decks or one of them.

"Just bear how fierce is the fight, Mabel," cried Mrs. Wyndham, anxiously.

"It is terrible, and I wonder how any man can live in such a mad scene," responded the maiden.

"There's folks dying there, mistis, for they fight harder and harder, and neither side seem to want to give up," volunteered Toby, while many of the negroes were wailing loudly at the scene of death.

Presently the fighting seemed to grow fiercer, then louder sounded the voices of the combatants, with an occasional wild outcry, and then suddenly silence reigned.

"Poor Bessie, pity her, alone in her home near such a scene," said Mabel, kindly.

But ere Mrs. Wyndham could reply a clarion voice was heard shouting:

"Now, lads, to your ship all!"

"Oh, heaven! that was like Percy's voice," cried Mrs. Wyndham.

And then up burst a sudden flame from the decks of one of the vessels, then another and another, and hot and fierce the firing began again.

But the flames revealed the scene, for they leaped up the rigging, seized the sails, and made all as bright as day.

One vessel, a schooner, was on fire, and swinging free from it, and urged off by sweeps, for the wind had lulled, was another craft.

All eyes fell upon the latter vessel at the same time, and from Mrs. Wyndham, Mabel, and half a hundred slaves broke the cry in one ringing chorus:

"The Jack o'-lantern!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TO THE RESCUE.

As the burning schooner became enveloped in flames, it lighted up the sea for far around, and cast a glare upon the mansion of Lakelands, revealing the eager, anxious faces of the lookers on.

"It is the cruiser," cried Mabel, recognizing the vessel that had put in for Lieutenant Langdon.

"And it is my son's yacht!"

"Oh, what can it mean?" groaned Mrs. Wyndham.

"See them leap from the burning vessel!" cried Mabel.

"And behold! those in the yacht fire upon them."

"There are boats rounding the stern of the burning craft."

"And they head for the yacht."

"Behold! they are fired upon, they reach the yacht, the struggle begins anew, and, Merciful God! they are beaten back!"

Mrs. Wyndham had spoken eagerly, as the different scenes she referred to came before her vision.

And it was true that there were two boats that had come around the schooner, crowded with men, and attacking the yacht, had been beaten off. One of the boats evidently overcrowded, or stove in, sunk a few lengths from the side of the Jack o'-lantern, while the other suddenly rowed off in the direction of The Everglades.

Instantly the yacht was put away to pursue; but the wind hardly filled her sails, and the oarsman of the boat sent it along at a terrific pace.

Eagerly all on the piazza at Lakelands watched, and soon saw a boat let fall from the davits of the yacht, and into it spring a dozen men.

"See! Percy! Percy! my son! my son!" shrieked Mrs. Wyndham, and every eye fell upon the well-known form of the master of Lakelands, as he sprung into the boat, and standing up in the stern, seemed to urge on the rowers.

Away bounded the boat under the pressure of strong arms, and straight in the wake of the other it went, while the yacht, with a heavy sweep out upon each side, seemed to be striving to get as far away from the burning schooner as possible.

Suddenly a form was seen to dash along the deck of the burning schooner, and as fifty eyes beheld it, fifty voices gave vent to one loud cry, which was distinctly heard by the watchers at Lakelands.

Instantly the boat, in which was Percy Wyndham, was seen to go sharp about, and put back toward the schooner.

"Great God! what can Percy mean?" cried Mrs. Wyndham.

"See! it is Raoul Langdon on the schooner!" The words broke in a shriek from Mabel Mortimer, and dropping upon her knees Mrs. Wyndham cried:

"God in Heaven have mercy upon him."
"He is weighted down with chains!" again cried Mabel in thrilling tones.

So bright now was the fire that all could see the form standing upon the fore-castle, and that he was ironed hands and feet, and dared not jump overboard, knowing that he would go straight to the bottom.

And there he stood, shielding himself as well as he could with the sails, from the intense heat, and the flames that were creeping toward him, and ready to spring, if he must, preferring to die by drowning rather than consumed by fire.

And upon the deck of the yacht was a large crowd, gazing in horror at the scene, while, his boat fairly bounding from the water at every terrific pull of the six oarsmen, was Percy Wyndham going to the rescue.

What it all meant none there on the piazza of Lakelands could know; but there before them was the awful scene and fascinated by it, they could not look away.

And straight toward the harbor of The Everglades pulled the boat that had left the schooner, keeping up its killing pace.

But not upon it were the eyes of the watchers turned, but upon the burning schooner, the tall form shrinking away from the fearful death that threatened him, and the bravely struggling boat going to his rescue.

Suddenly, out from the headland was seen to dart a white skiff.

All knew it, for it was the surf-skiff of Bessie Gito.

It held but a single occupant, and that one was the one who had been known as "The Fair Lady of the Lagoon" and as "Captain Bessie."

With a power none would believe a woman possessed she sent the skiff over the waters and straight for the burning schooner, for she, too, had recognized the man who stood upon the bows, chains hanging from his neck, wrists and ankles.

"Back! Back! I will save him!"

The words were distinctly heard, and came from the lips of Percy Wyndham.

Bessie Gito was seen to turn, glance toward the boat, and then she cried in ringing tones:

"Back! Turn back! For I will save him or die with him!"

A cheer burst from those on the yacht at this brave cry of the daring girl, and, fearful of the explosion that soon must come, the oarsmen in Percy Wyndham's boat partially stopped rowing, as though to allow the girl to risk the danger to save Raoul Langdon.

But Percy Wyndham's sword was seen to flash above their heads, and once more the boat fairly bounded forward.

It was evident that Percy was determined to save Raoul Langdon, if in his power, and to reach the schooner before Bessie Gito, so as to keep her out of harm's way, for his boat was much nearer than was the surf-skiff.

Under the energetic urging of their young leader, the men in the boat pulled with a power that seemed superhuman, and wild shouts broke from those on the yacht, and were echoed by the slaves at Lakelands, as the rescuers were seen to suddenly back water and glide up to the very bows of the burning schooner.

Then Percy Wyndham and a seaman were seen to spring to the bows, and the chained officer was taken from his fearful position, and the oarsmen gave way with an energy that showed they now pulled for their lives.

The shout of joy at the daring rescue caused Bessie to again turn, and she saw that Percy Wyndham had saved her lover, and instantly she changed the course of her skiff to head the boat off.

Still watching from the piazza, Mrs. Wyndham, Mabel and the faithful and excited blacks saw the skiff and the boat pull along, side by side, and those on the yacht use every effort to get further away from the burning craft, which now seemed one living fire, for the flames had eaten their way to the bowsprit, where a few moments before Raoul Langdon had stood.

"Lordy, mistis, jest see there!"

It was old Toby that uttered the cry, and out of the little harbor of The Everglades was seen to glide a small sloop-yacht.

"It is the Quickstep, and those from the boat have boarded her," cried Mabel.

And true it was the little yacht, a craft of ten tons and remarkable fleetness, had been boldly cut out by those in the boat that Percy Wyndham had been pursuing when he turned back to the rescue of Raoul Langdon.

Though the wind was so light as to barely

move the Jack-o'-Lantern, it sent the little Quickstep along at a three-knot an hour pace.

"Master sees the Quickstep, and is going after it, mistis," shouted Uncle Toby, as the boat darted away on a course to head the Quickstep off.

But just then the burning schooner was seen to split asunder, masses of flaming woodwork shot up into the air, and the beautiful vessel was blown to atoms, while upon the sea and shore fell a pall of blackness that could almost be felt, and no sound broke the stillness other than the heavy plunging into the waters of the debris of the fated craft.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PERCY WYNDHAM'S STORY.

So dazzled were the eyes of all by the bright glare of the burning schooner, and then by the explosion, that it was a long time before any one could see over the dark waters.

To those at Lakelands the scene was wholly shut out; but to those on the Jack-o'-lantern and in the boat, was visible the Quickstep running seaward at a pace that rendered it impossible for tired oarsmen to follow her with a hope of overhauling her, and for the Jack-o'-lantern to make the attempt was out of the question, as the breeze hardly moved her a mile to the little craft's three miles.

Reluctantly, therefore, Percy Wyndham returned to the Jack-o'-lantern, and headed for the Lakelands' haven, while Bessie Gito put back homeward in her skiff.

Percy knew the tedious time it would take the yacht to get to an anchorage, and unwilling to ask the tired oarsmen to row there, hailed Bessie with:

"Ho the surf skiff!"

"Ahoy!" came back in the clear, musical tones of the young girl.

"Don't you wish some passengers to Lakelands, Bessie?"

"Ay, ay, sir."

Quickly the skiff was put about, and soon Percy Wyndham and Raoul Langdon were in it, and the maiden, refusing to relinquish her oars, sent her light craft flying over the waters.

Raoul Langdon was still in irons, stern, and suffering, for he had had both his face and hands blistered by the intense heat, and Percy Wyndham was also quiet, while Bessie did not speak a word until she ran alongside of the water-stairs. Then she said:

"Now, Mr. Wyndham, I have brought my passengers safely into port, so will leave them."

"You will do no such thing, Bessie, for I have something to say to you, so come with us to the mansion."

"Come, for I will not have you say nay."

She silently consented, and stepped to one side of the young lieutenant to aid him, for she saw that he was weighted down with his irons and also suffering.

Percy also aided him, and the three were suddenly descried coming up the walk, and the next instant their hands were grasped and they were drawn into the brightly-lighted library.

Bessie shrunk back at sight of Mabel, but the latter walked straight up to her, kissed her softly and led her to a chair, into which the poor girl sunk wearily and buried her face in her hands.

"Uncle Toby."

"Sah to you, master?"

"Send Blacksmith Bob here at once to knock off these irons for Lieutenant Langdon!"

"Yes, master," and Toby disappeared and a hush fell upon all, for no one seemed to wish to speak.

But Mrs. Wyndham left the room to get lint and cooling salves for the burns upon Raoul Langdon's face and hands, and Percy forced the suffering officer to lie down upon a lounge.

Soon Blacksmith Bob* appeared, a large, honest-faced giant, and it was but the work of a few minutes for him to remove the shackles from the young lieutenant.

"Thank you, Bob, and now, mother, let us dress Langdon's burns, for I know he suffers though he will not say so."

The young officer smiled his thanks, and soon was made quite comfortable under the ministering hands of Miss Wyndham and Bessie, who silently aided her.

"Now, Percy, my son, pray tell us what all this terrible scene to-night means," said Mrs. Wyndham.

"It means, mother," and he glanced toward Bessie as he spoke:

"That one whom we all believed to be dead, is alive, and was on that schooner to-night."

With a spring like a tigress, Bessie was upon her feet, her face livid and her eyes burning.

"Do you mean Forrester, the Freebooter?" she asked, wildly.

"Yes, Bessie; but pray be calm."

"I am perfectly calm."

She sunk down again in her chair, and in an instant had regained control of herself.

"Oh, Percy! do you mean it?" asked Mrs. Wyndham.

* Every well-regulated plantation has its own negro blacksmith, and, in fact, other mechanics upon it.—THE AUTHOR.

"It is true, mother."

"Bessie gave the man a bad wound on his head that stunned him, but did not kill him."

"Some of the men threw him overboard, and he revived it seems, and managed to swim ashore, for in no other way could he have escaped, and he it was who must have stolen the boat of the Lantern left by Caleb at the Cliff Cottage."

"Several nights ago he attacked a boat from the present cruiser Lioness, your old vessel, Bessie, that was going up the river for aid."

"It seems the Lioness ran aground in chasing a coast pirate craft, and a new officer, a Lieutenant Larramour—"

"Lawrence Larramour!" said Raoul Langdon.

"Yes, that was his name, Langdon."

"I know him, and a most gallant fellow."

"Poor fellow, he was killed."

"He had just arrived in New Orleans from the North, the day the Lioness sailed, and she being short in officers and men, he was ordered with the seamen who accompanied him south, to go with the Lioness on her cruise."

"And he it was that her captain sent up to the city for aid, and he had with him a middy, coxswain and eight oarsmen."

"Below the city some leagues they were overhauled by a large launch, attacked, and Larramour was killed with several of his men."

"Then Forrester, for he it was who attacked him, went on to the city, dressed himself in the dead lieutenant's uniform, and shaved off his long beard, leaving a mustache only, and boldly called upon the Governor-Commandante, made the report about the Lioness, and got an order to take the schooner Corsair, with a volunteer crew to her aid."

"I need not tell you that the volunteer crew were Forrester's men, and that the schooner was taken without trouble."

"Reaching the point where he had left his launch, Forrester put the prisoners all in the boat of the Lioness, and sent them to the city with a message to the Governor."

"I arrived the day after this affair, and a presentiment told me that he meant mischief along this coast, and I at once shipped a crew of fifty men, all that I could get in my haste to come home, and to-night sighted the Corsair running in toward Cliff Point."

"Instantly I headed for her, and somehow I was not seen until almost upon her."

"We had no guns to fire upon her, so had to board her, and at once we became engaged in a hot fight."

"She fired several shots at us before we ran alongside, but they were badly aimed and did us no damage."

"It was these shots that startled us," said Mrs. Wyndham.

"They also," continued Percy, "called back a boat that had started shoreward, and in which was the chief, and when he returned to his deck the fight became savage indeed."

"I soon realized that we were fighting two to one upon their own decks, and that some of my men would not face the fire as they should, so I had no alternative but to try and retreat to the yacht."

But before doing this I dashed down into the cabin and set the schooner on fire in several places.

"When I returned to the deck I found my men had retreated, followed by the pirates; but seeing me, they rallied, and I gained the yacht and cast off."

"Driven from their vessel, the pirates, many of them jumped overboard, and perished, while we certainly left a number of dead and wounded among them, with, I regret to say, a few of our own men."

"Forrester, however, managed to secure two boats' crews and at once attacked the yacht, to seize her."

"But we beat him off, with a loss of one boat, and he pulled for The Everglades."

"I knew his object at once, so gave chase, when I was horrified to recognize you, Langdon, in chains on board the burning schooner."

"I was in irons below decks, awaiting to be harged, for so the Freebooter had threatened."

"I managed to break the ring bolt in the deck, to which I was made fast, and gain the deck, and to you, my dear Wyndham, I owe it that I live, for Bessie, daring as she was, could not have reached me, as the intolerable heat would have forced me to spring into the sea."

"Well, you all know the rest, and that Forrester the Freebooter still lives, and it will not take him long to be again afloat."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A WELL-MATCHED PAIR.

SOME ten days after the daring capture of the Corsair, by her old commander, and his successful flight, Pietro was seated in his little office, as was his wont, when Afric announced a visitor.

Pietro was always cautious.

He expected a visitor, for he had sent for a fellow villain to come and see him; but still he wished to be on the safe side, and asked:

"Do you know him, Afric?"

"He the same gemman, sah, you sent me to see."

"Ah! admit him."

Afric's "gemman" was rather a seedy-looking personage to bear that title, for he was decidedly "down at the heels and out at the elbows."

That he was a villain was as evident as was the fact that he was in hard luck.

His face was the picture of cunning, and yet about it there was much of daring and resolution.

"Well, well, Conrad, I am glad to see you," said Pietro.

"And poor Conrad the Creole is glad to see you, senor, if there is any work on hand, for I am in hard luck."

"You look it."

"I feel it."

"What has gone wrong with you?"

"Business has been bad."

"All of your business is bad," said Pietro with a chuckle.

"You ought to know, senor, as I have done much for you."

"Ah! you can hit back I see: but what say you to a little job?"

"I'm your man."

"It's a delicate affair."

"I'm delicate myself, so it will just suit me."

"You made bad work of the last scents I put you on."

"No, I did my work well, Senor Pietro, for I threw the girl overboard, and blind luck saved her, and in the attack on the plantation home of that young tiger, why I needed just a hundred men more than I had."

"A hundred, nonsense!"

"You should have seen how he and his nigs just lapped us up."

"Why it was beautiful, senor."

"It must have been."

"Now how do you like the idea of making another trip to Lakelands?"

"I want a thousand men."

"Say, Conrad, your ill fortune has turned your brain."

"I was just thinking of the last fight we had with him."

"Then you don't care to go?"

"I didn't say so."

"There is no killing to be done this time."

"Say, Pietro, your good fortune has turned your brain."

"What do you mean?" angrily asked Pietro.

"When you want work done, and there's nobody to kill, there must be something wrong."

"Well, there is no red work to be done."

"What is it I am to do?"

"You'll go then?"

"For gold."

"You shall have it."

"What am I to do?"

"Disguise yourself in some way, and—"

"I don't know myself now, I'm so thin."

"You do look hungry."

"I am hungry."

"Well, you shall soon have a good meal: but you ought not to be so extravagant."

"I am not as extravagant as I look, Pietro."

"Well, now to work."

"All right."

"You are to disguise yourself, go to Lakelands or The Everglades, or both, on some excuse, and discover for me if Planter Percy Wyndham is in love with Miss Mabel Mortimer."

"How in thunder am I to know?"

"Do you think they would tell me?"

"No, but you can discover just whether it looks as though the vendetta between the families were to be buried, and a wedding follow, or if there was no more than gratitude on the part of the maiden to the master of Lakelands for saving her life."

"I'll soon know all about it."

"Find out just what I want to know and I'll give you a hundred pesos."

"For expenses?"

"No, for the work."

"I must have more."

"Call it two hundred then, and you pay expenses."

"Call it five thousand and you pay all expenses, Senor Pietro."

Pietro was upon his feet livid with rage.

"Gutter vagabond, what do you take me for?" he hissed.

"The greatest villain unchanged!" was the cool reply.

"I'll have your life, Conrad the Creole, if you dare to insult me."

"Oh no, you will not kill me, Pietro."

"I was just coming to see you when you sent for me."

"I am not so poor as I look, for this out-at-the-elbow business is a disguise that I put on to try a little game."

"I want money, and I want just five thousand."

"Give me that and I will do the work well, and if there is any killing to be done I'll throw that in."

"I will not give you more than two hundred pesos."

"I might tell you something you would like to know."

"No, sir."

"I might tell you of a black-hearted villain in this city, whom many believe to be an honest man, but who made a fortune by assassination, robbery and piracy, and has one of the loveliest daughters in the world, hidden away from sight."

"Why for five thousand dollars I could tell you just how I spotted this man and found out his secret, and he would pay you well to keep it."

"I'll give you the five thousand, Conrad, and sometime, when I have leisure to hear you, I want you to come and tell me the story."

Conrad the Creole smiled, for he knew his shot had hit dead center.

So he counted out the money which Pietro gave him until he had the five thousand in hand.

"Now give me the two hundred for expenses, Senor Pietro."

They were handed him, and he said quietly:

"I will return soon."

"Adios, Senor Pietro."

"Adios, Monsieur Conrad," was the reply, and the Creole left the room and the *cafe*, muttering to himself:

"Well, my dogging his steps was worth something after all."

"Not possessing a centime when I went there, and now worth five thousand two hundred pesos."

"I must work that mine for all I can get."

And Pietro Paulo smiled grimly, after his visitor left, and then touched the little bell upon the table before him.

Afric at once appeared.

"Afric!"

"Massa."

"You saw the man who just left here?"

"Yes, massa."

"Follow him, see where he goes, and to-night put your knife in his heart."

"He has with him five thousand dollars which you can have."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, massa; but does yer mean for me too kill him?"

"So I said."

"And can have the five thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"I'll do it, massa," and Afric disappeared too, and went on the trail of Conrad the Creole, as merciless as a bloodhound does after its prey.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE VAGABOND.

PIETRO was a trifle nervous after the departure of Conrad the Creole, and Afric upon his track.

In the first place the mention of his daughter by the Creole proved to him that he knew his secret, and he at once determined to silence his tongue forever, and had therefore set the negro to do it.

He could trust Afric well he knew, and he had served him and his daughter so faithfully, that he had become attached to the negro.

But should the black fail in his effort to kill Conrad the Creole, and should he be captured in the act, could he not tell some very awkward stories against him, and would he not, if he could save himself thereby?

"This won't do," he muttered.

"I must follow Afric and see how the affair ends."

"But I dare not go as I am."

Springing to his feet he hastily threw on the disguise of an old man in tatters, seized a staff, as though it was needed to support his aged frame, and passed out into the street.

He knew where Conrad lived or could be found, and supposing that he would go there first, he at once started for the locality.

To his delight he saw Afric standing in a small alley-way, and watching a house upon the opposite side.

Tottering along, the pretended old man sunk down on a door step not five feet from where the negro stood.

Afric glanced at him and said in a bantering way:

"Old man, you done be old 'nough ter die."

Pietro pretended not to hear him, and soon let his head drop back as though he had gone to sleep.

As he did so Conrad the Creole came out of the house across the street and walked directly toward the alley, which led through a block to the river.

The locality of the town where they were was the then lower part of the "French quarter," and very few persons were visible, and those mostly beggars and children.

The alley was arched over, low and dark, a few paces back from the entrance, and there it was that Afric stood, half concealed by a buttress.

Straight toward him Conrad the Creole went.

He was no longer in rags, but wore a flash suit and was, to all appearance, a city sport of the lowest order.

He had stopped on the way to his wretched domicile and purchased the second-hand suit, hat and shoes he wore, and also a cane.

He stepped into the alley, and his eyes ever alert, discovered Afric just as he made the spring to seize him by the throat with one hand, and drive a long knife he held in the other to his heart.

But Conrad had learned by long experience not to be caught napping, and dropped at once to the ground, and over him Afric fell headlong.

Ere he could rise to his feet Conrad had him by the throat and held a knife pressed hand against him, while he said coolly:

"You are Pietro's nigger!"

"Yes, massa, don't kill me, sah!"

"Get up and talk to me and I won't."

He took Afric's knife as he spoke, and rising from his body, allowed the negro to regain his feet.

"Well, tell me all about it."

"Bout what, massa?"

"Come, nigger, don't fool with me, for I have no time to lose."

"Yes, massa, I talk right out."

"You were sent to follow me by Pietro?"

"Yes, massa."

"Good! now what does he give you for the work?"

"What work, massa?"

"Killing me."

"He done told me you hab five thousand dollars I might have if I kill yer."

"Correct; but don't you wish to make more than that?"

"Yes, massa, I does."

"And have enough to go far from here and live like a gentleman?"

"Yes, massa, I wants ter lib like a gemman."

"Well, if you tell me all you know about Pietro, I will make him pay me fifty thousand dollars to keep the secret."

"Lordy, massa."

"And you shall have ten thousand."

"I tell you all, massa."

What Afric told, the disguised Pietro could not wholly catch; but he heard enough to make him know that all that Afric had discovered was being betrayed.

After pretending to rouse himself from sleep, he struggled to his feet with apparently great effort and stood looking at the Creole and the negro.

"Well, old man, what do you want?" angrily asked the Creole.

"I am old, homeless, and want bread, monsieur."

"Can you give it to me, for I ask not for money."

"Here, take this and get bread with it," and the Creole handed him a piece of silver to get rid of him.

"Monsieur, you are very kind to an old man, and I will repay you for it."

"I want no pay, only go on your way, old man, and leave me alone," and Conrad spoke impatiently.

"One moment, monsieur."

"I am old and a vagabond; but I know where lies that which will make any man a fortune."

"Ha! what do you know that will bring gold, old man?" cried the Creole.

"I know of silver plate, and gold plate, jewels and jewelry, that can all be had for the taking, if a man is bold enough to take the risk, which I cannot do, for I am too aged, and my limbs are tremulous."

"You know where gold plate and jewels can be had for the risk of taking?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And will lead me there?"

"If you will give me enough profit from them to keep me in bread a year or so, for I can not last much longer, monsieur."

"You look half dead now; but I will reward you well for the secret."

"Then I will tell you if you will come there this night."

"Where?"

"It is to the house of a grandee, and they are all gone from home."

"His name?"

"I will take you there to-night, monsieur, not tell you."

"How know such as you, of the interior of the home of a grandee?"

"I said, monsieur, that the family and servants were all away from the house, and I found a key that unlocks the gate in the garden wall, and I go in there at night and sleep, for a window was left open."

"Good! I will meet you where you say to-night," and turning to Afric, the Creole continued:

"Now you go back and tell old Pietro you could not find me, and to-night meet me where this old vagabond says, and we will share alike in the booty, if he tells the truth."

"Yes, massa."

"Now, old man, where shall I meet you at nine o'clock to-night?"

The pretended vagabond made an appointment in the better portion of the city, where were the residences of the rich, and then he went on his way. Conrad, the Creole, kept on to the river, and Afric returned to the home of his master.

CHAPTER XXXVII.
FOR SAFETY'S SAKE.

"Afric, I wish to see you," said Pietro, as his slave in obedience to his call came into the room.

"Yes, massa, I were coming ter tell yer, sah, I c'dn't find de gemman dis mornin'."

"Oh, you were, were you?"

"Yes, massa; but I looked fer him a heap."

"You did?"

"Yes, sah."

"I am sorry."

"So am I, massa."

"Well, I want you to go with me to-night—"

"Missy Felice done want me, sah, ter-night, she say."

"Well, Afric, I always yield to her; but you don't look well, so take a drink of this brandy, and then go to your room and lie down."

"Tankee, massa," and the negro gulped down the liquor with wonderful relish.

"Now take a nap, Afric, for you don't look well, and I will call you when I want you."

The negro was only too glad to get a chance for a *siesta*, and ran off to his little attic room, and was soon fast asleep.

Half an hour after Pietro entered the room to find the black writhing in agony.

"Oh massa! massa! I am dying, sah, an' I wasn't able ter go down-stairs and call nobody," he groaned.

"Yes, Afric, you are dying," was the cool response, and Pietro stood by smiling upon the agony of the black.

"Save me, massa! save me, sah, fer I awful wicked nigger, and don't be fit to die, sah," implored the black.

"Afric, that is all you are fit for as I know you to be treacherous to me."

"I have done well by you, and though you tried to kill Conrad the Creole this morning, you failed, and then to save yourself betrayed me."

"No, massa, I didn't, sah."

"Fore de Lord, I didn't sah!"

"Afric, you are lying, and to convince you that I know it, I will tell you that I was the old vagabond, who made an appointment with Conrad the Creole to rob a house to-night."

"Oh Lordy! I done gone now."

"You certainly are, Afric, for I gave you a deadly poison in that brandy."

"Lordy hab mercy!"

"And Afric, you will not live an hour."

"Good-by!" and turning upon his heel Pietro left the little attic room and returned to his own private quarters.

An hour after he called to one of his servants and told him to send Afric to him.

But, after a diligent search Afric could not be found.

"Ah! I remember, he said he was ill and asked my permission to allow him to go to his room."

"Search for him there."

The servant went up-stairs at a slow pace, and came down at a terrific speed.

He was white with fear and stammered forth:

"He is dead, senor! he is dead!"

And it was true, the runaway black was dead, Pietro found upon going up to his room, and, as a faithful servant had him given a decent burial.

At the appointed hour that night Pietro adjourned to the rendezvous with Conrad, the Creole.

He was again dressed as the old vagabond, and muttered, as he stood looking up and down the street:

"It was luck for me I bought this place, for it is just the spot I need for my purpose to-night, and it will make a nice home for Felice."

Soon the form of the Creole appeared, and seeing the supposed vagabond, he called out gayly:

"Well, old man, you here?"

"Yes, this is the place, and no one is here now to disturb us."

"You are sure?"

"I am."

"Have you the key of this hole-in-the-wall?"

"Here it is, monsieur."

He opened the door in the wall as he spoke, and the two stepped quickly in.

"Now listen, monsieur," whispered the supposed vagabond.

The Creole obeyed, and just then a knife descended into his back with a force that went deep and into his heart.

The Creole gave a moan, tried to cry out, and then to turn and grapple with his foe; but it was useless, as he sunk upon the ground and heard his murderer say:

"Conrad, the Creole, you were going to prove a traitor to me, and thus I have ended your life."

A curse against his slayer, and Conrad, the Creole, was dead.

With a coolness that was remarkable under the circumstances, Pietro robbed his victim of his money and all he had about him of value, tossed the body into the street, and returned to his home in a most jubilant mood, for he had silenced the tongues that knew the secret of his having a daughter, and that not one shadow

should fall upon her heart in knowing aught of his cruel, murderous career, he would have taken a life every day in the year if need be, for to kill with him was merely pastime.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A THREAT OF REVENGE.

When Pietro entered his home he glanced into the street and saw that business was thriving there.

Then he went to his private room, and calling a servant, asked about Afric.

He had been quietly taken from the house to the grave, shortly after dark, so as not to drive away customers, was the report.

"Buono!" and with this ejaculation Pietro sat down to his usual work, and pleasing toil at that, of looking at his profit column, and comparing it with expenses.

But he was not to be allowed to remain undisturbed, as a caller was announced.

"Who is it?"

He was a negro, and the servant never saw him before, was the response.

Pietro asked where he was.

"In the hallway, senor."

Then Pietro reconnoitered through a glass eye-hole.

"It is him, I'll bet high on it," was what he said to himself, and to the servant:

"Admit him!"

Pietro went back to his seat, and immediately after in walked an old negro, with gray wool and a stoop in his form.

"Am dis Massa Pietro?" he asked.

"Yes. Who are you, my man?"

"I po' ole nigger, sah."

"You deserve to be hanged, Forrester, the Freebooter, for allowing that boy to burn your vessel," was the response of Pietro.

"Hah! you know me, then?" came in deep tones from the pretended negro.

"I do."

"Then my disguise is a bad one?"

"It is the best I ever saw you have on."

"Then how did you know me?"

"I was expecting you, for Mr. Percy Wyndham arrived several days ago and made his report to the Governor-Commandante, and the news is upon every lip in town."

"Then I shall soon change the tune they sing!" fiercely said the Freebooter.

"How mean you?"

"I wish another vessel."

"It will be hard to get, senor captain."

"Bah! nothing is hard to obtain to the determined and daring man."

"I admit you are generally successful."

"And shall be this time."

"Sit down, and we'll talk it over."

The Freebooter threw himself into a chair, and Pietro locked his door, and then placed before him a decanter of brandy.

"You want a vessel, you say?"

"I do."

"Did the Senor Wyndham tell the truth about boarding you in his yacht, and when he could not hold your deck, setting your schooner on fire and escaping with two-thirds of his men?"

"He did indeed, and he is modest to say no more."

"I tell you, Pietro, he is the gamest man I ever met," said the Freebooter, with real enthusiasm.

"He seems to have a charmed life."

"He does indeed."

"He reports that you escaped in a small yacht you cut out from The Everglades Plantation."

"I did, with just thirty of my men, and had there been more than a capful of wind I would never have gotten away."

"But there was just breeze enough to keep my little craft running two miles to the Lantern's one."

"You were fortunate."

"I generally am as fortunate in my escapes, as I am unfortunate in losing my vessels."

"How did you get here?"

"Run through Pontchartrain, crossed to the river and came down to the city to-night."

"And your disguise?"

"Got it from Levi, for I went right there to hide my face at once."

"And you want a vessel?"

"So I said."

"And a crew?"

"Some fifty men, for I have thirty good fellows who will be straggling in by twos and threes to-night and to-morrow for you to take care of."

"Have you any vessel in view?"

"Where is the Lioness?"

"In port."

"She was not much hurt then by running aground?"

"No, it seems not, for she has been here a week, and was only in the dock for a day or so."

"Good! where is she anchored?"

"At the same old place."

"And has she a crew on board?"

"Yes, about thirty men."

"You know this?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I had you in mind, so investigated."

"Pietro, you are a treasure, and I wish you to help me."

"What can I do?"

"Give me a room with you here, and get me a good crew and keep them on hand."

"That is easy enough to do, senor; but is that all?"

"No."

"What more can I do?"

"Find out all you can about the Lioness and let me know."

"I will do so, senor, for I wish to see you afloat once more, only do not lose the Lioness, as I believe that is the only craft that is afloat now that can keep your neck out of the noose."

"I believe you are right, Pietro; but let me get that craft, and I intend to make my first cruise one of revenge."

"Ah! how so, senor captain?"

"Well, I intend to first strike Lakelands, and at night, and seize Planter Percy Wyndham and one other."

"And that other, senor?"

"Is a traitor officer of mine, whose name is Raoul Langdon."

"He was with the Lioness of the Sea—"

"Captain Bess?"

"Yes, he was with her, and very badly wounded in the battle in which I lost my schooner."

"She carried him to her cabin and nursed him back to life, and he was visiting Wyndham, when—"

"A pirate officer visit Planter Wyndham, senor?"

"Ah! he was playing pirate, when with me, to capture me, for he is a regular navy officer."

"Ah, yes, that is different, but I interrupted you, senor."

"I was saying that this Langdon was visiting at Lakelands, and I ran down there, and by a clever ruse, well played by young Seawall, got possession of him."

"I put him in irons, intending to hang him when I caught Captain Bessie."

"At night I put back to make her a visit, and then it was that Wyndham attacked me and burnt my schooner."

"But to your story of revenge, captain."

"Well, this Langdon was severely burned, and is a guest at Lakelands; so I will go there and capture both him and his host, besides making a good haul of plate and jewels, I believe."

"From there I run across to The Everglades! and capture my intended bride—"

"What! the fair heiress?"

"Yes; for I love her."

"Of course, senor."

"But I do, Pietro, and she shall become my bride, for I have sworn it."

"And then, senor?"

"Then I shall continue on to the Cliff Cottage, and capture Captain Bessie."

"And your revenge will be complete, senor?"

"It will be when I have made Metel Mortimer my wife, made Percy Wyndham walk the plank, hanged Raoul Langdon in the rigging, and set Bessie Gito upon an island of the Bahamas to die of starvation, for no help can ever reach her there."

The savage Freebooter said this with the utmost fierceness of manner, and Pietro laughed as though he enjoyed the anticipation of the cruel revenge quite as much as did the human devil who had plotted it.

"Well, senor, the first thing to do is to get your vessel, and that cannot be done under a week or so, and you must be content to wait."

"I can wait; but lose no time in finding out all you can for me."

Pietro promised activity in the matter, and then showed the pirate chief to his room, which was certainly a most comfortable one, and acceptable even to the luxurious tastes of the stranded Skimmer of the Seas.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

UNREQUITED LOVE.

When Pietro failed in his attempt to learn the secret loves of the hearts of the master of Lakelands and heiress of The Everglades through the death of Conrad, the Creole, for there is no doubt but that worthy would have gone upon his mission had he lived, he determined to discover it for himself.

Percy Wyndham had become such a hero and important personage, since his late brilliant exploits, that he was readily heralded in the city, and Pietro went boldly to the hotel where he always put up when in town.

He had dressed himself up for the occasion in a neat suit of black, devoid of all flash, and wore no jewelry.

He learned that Mr. Wyndham was in town, and also in his room, having arrived from his plantation that morning by the way of the lake, where his yacht then awaited him.

Pietro sent his card up with his full name:

"Pietro Paulo."

"Mr. Wyndham would see the gentleman," said the servant who carried the name.

Up to the room Pietro went, and, for the first

time in his life, he was anxious at heart and nervous.

Percy Wyndham sat by the open window smoking, and was alone.

Upon a table near him lay a number of letters that had been left at the hotel for him, and which he had read, and some of which had been answered, for there were several addressed epistles with the others.

At the entrance of Pietro, Percy arose politely, and said:

"The Senor Paulo, I presume?"

"Yes, senor, and I hope you will pardon me for intruding upon you."

"There is no intrusion, Mr. Paulo; so be seated, and tell me in what way I can serve you."

There was that in the frank manner of the young hero that drew Pietro to him as he had never been drawn to a man before.

He was courtly, proud it was true, but there was a substratum of kindness and heart pervading every word and look of Percy.

Pietro took the seat offered to him, and said somewhat nervously:

"Senor, I have called upon you to speak upon a most delicate subject."

"Indeed!" and Percy arched his well-marked brows.

"Yes, senor."

"I will listen with pleasure to all you have to say."

"You are very kind, senor; but it is just what I expected of you, for you have won a famous name of late."

"I fear my acts have been exaggerated, senor," said Percy Wyndham, with a smile.

"No, senor, the whole truth has not been told of you, or by you, I'll warrant; but what has been said has reached many a young heart and made its impression, as I well know, for I would speak to you of one who has heard of all your achievements, and seeing you on the street on several occasions, has lost her heart to you."

The man spoke too seriously for Percy to laugh at him, and not knowing what to say, he remained silent.

Then Pietro continued:

"Senor, I tell you but the truth when I say that I do hope that your affections are not engaged, for the one to whom I refer loves you with all the ardent fervor of her nature."

"My dear sir, you certainly surprise and pain me," said Percy, with real feeling in tone and looks.

"To pain you, senor, implies that there is another who holds a place in your heart to the exclusion of the one to whom I refer."

Percy Wyndham remained silent, for he was perplexed, really pained in fact.

"The lady I have reference to, senor, is just budding into beautiful womanhood, being just seventeen."

"She is beautiful in face and form—nay, you may judge of her face, for here is a miniature likeness of her."

Pietro handed forth as he spoke a beautifully painted miniature, the very counterpart of Felice, his daughter.

It was in a solid gold medallion, set with precious stones of rare beauty and of very great value.

The costliness of the setting struck Percy, and he took it into his hand with surprise and admiration.

"The face shows the purity of the soul, senor."

"It is a beautiful, wondrously beautiful face," said Percy, warmly, gazing in rapt attention upon it.

"She meant that miniature for you, senor."

"For me?"

"Yes, senor, and there her name is engraven."

"Felice," said Percy, gazing at the name.

"Yes, senor."

"And you say this beautiful being loves me?"

"She does, senor."

Percy sighed softly, and there came over his face a look of intense sadness.

"Senor, no lady in New Orleans has her wealth, and it is all her own."

"The riches she may possess, senor, hold no claim for me, but her face is exquisitely lovely, and is such a one that almost any man could love."

"She is of a good family, senor."

"I do not doubt it, for her look is full of refinement."

"But, senor, I am bound to another, one as lovely, as pure as your Felice, and my heart can hold but one love."

"I am a man of honor, and I would not seek to know the beautiful Felice, for I could never offer to her my heart."

"I trust that her affection for me is but a passing fancy, for she is worthy the love of some noble man who could make her life happy."

"I appreciate her regard for me, and she will ever be remembered most kindly by me, senor."

"Can I say more?"

He saw by the man's face that it was a sore disappointment to him, and he asked:

"What is the fair Felice to you, senor?"

"My child, my life, my all!"

"Oh, Senor Wyndham, if you could only have

loved my child I would be a happy man, and content to die and leave her all to you."

"To-day men are all avarice, all self, all dishonor, while you, senor, are the soul of honor, and to you, above all others, I wished to intrust my child."

"I am no longer a young man; I have trouble of the heart, and some day, nay at any time, may drop out of life, and I wished to feel that my beautiful Felice had one to lean upon who would be all that she could wish in this world."

Pietro spoke earnestly, and that Percy Wyndham pitied him he saw.

But he knew the man before him too well, he read human nature as an open book, and well he understood that Percy's love was not to be changed from the one upon whom he had set it, and, without giving him a chance to reply, he said, quickly:

"Pardon me, senor, for I am a father who makes his child his idol."

"Forget my visit to you, and farewell."

He turned quickly away and left the room, and not until he had gone from sight some time did Percy Wyndham find that he had the miniature of Felice in his hand.

He ran after his visitor, but could nowhere find a trace of him, and, wondering at the strange affair, he returned to his room in deep and painful meditation.

CHAPTER XL.

DON MARCO ARRIVES.

WHEN Pietro, the Italian, left the hotel where he had had his strange interview with Percy Wyndham, he hastened out by a side door purposely, as it was his desire to leave the miniature with the one he had selected for his daughter's future husband.

He was in no amiable mood when he returned to his home, as his domestics very suddenly discovered.

He was not angry with Percy for not returning the love of Felice, but with Fate for having such the case that he could not love her, and, not having Fate at hand to vent his spite upon, he made it lively for the servants.

Felice had seen Percy several times in her rides, and she had asked who he was.

She had already mentally fallen in love with Percy Wyndham, on account of the romance of his life and that he was a hero, and that the handsome man she admired so much should be the young planter, caused her heart to give a great bound of pleasure.

There is no doubt but that, had Percy Wyndham been thrown with her, she would have given up her whole heart to him; but the devoted love she was said to feel was all in Pietro's brain, hoping that things would come out as he wished them.

He was cursing all of the servants by all the saints in the calendar when a vehicle drove up and a gentleman, enveloped in a cloak, alighted and stepped quickly to the private door leading into the hallway instead of to the cafe.

"Admit him!" he yelled to the servant nearest, and, going to his private room, he was almost immediately followed by the stranger.

Throwing aside his soft hat, which had been drawn down over his eyes, and his Spanish cloak, the stranger said, lightly:

"Well, Pietro, I am back, as you see, and how do you like me?"

"I knew you the moment you put your foot out of the vehicle, and I think you'll pass in your own family for a stranger."

"Have you been to your hotel, Don Marco Mortemas?"

"I have not, but I sent my luggage up from the ship in care of my valet, and I took a carriage to come by and report to you."

"You seem in a remarkably good humor, senor."

"Who would not be with my prospects? But the truth is, Pietro, I won at monte in three nights, in Mexico, more than I made by all my smuggling."

"And lost it again in less time."

"Not so."

"You have it with you?"

"I have."

"Then make a grander splurge than you had intended."

"I shall."

"Now tell me the news."

"You are the most curious man I ever knew, Don Marco."

"But I have news."

"Well?"

"You won't care to hear it."

"Why?"

"Because it is about your foe."

"What of him?"

"He has distinguished himself again."

"In Heaven's name, how?"

"He boarded Forrester the Freebooter's schooner in his little yacht and burned her up."

"The devil!"

"Oh! he escaped."

"Who?"

"The devil."

"You mean the Freebooter?"

"Yes, Don Marco."

"That man has loves like a cat is said to have."

"Yes, but one can get to the end of a cat's string of lives in time, and Forrester will yet dance the yard-arm jig to slow music, senor."

"I shouldn't wonder. But now I must be off, so is there anything else to tell?"

"Not that I think of. But I will see that your arrival is pushed with a flourish, and you'll soon see what a lion you'll be."

"Not nervous, I hope?"

"Not in the least, for I never would recognize myself as Mark Mortimer of old."

A few more words and the two parted, Mark Mortimer to go to the very hotel where he had always stopped, and be unrecognized, so wholly was he metamorphosed by his beard, long hair, darkly-dyed complexion, and Mexican attire.

Of course Don Marco wished the best rooms in the hotel, and got them, and he cared so little for money that he had new furniture put into them at once at his own expense.

He drank his own wines at dinner, and soon became all the rage, being dined and wined, fêted and toadied until he almost wished he had never become Don Marco Mortemas.

And all this occurred in a few weeks, for once the lion came it did not take the citizens long to lionize him, for he was reported to be worth many millions.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE TWO NOTES.

DON MARCO MORTEMAS seemed to have it all his own way with the good society people of the Oleander City, for he was courted by papas, mammas, and misses without number, while fascinating widows also sought to ensnare him.

Who was his "bright particular star" at first, few could tell, for he seemed not to have centered upon any one fair maid, so the closest watchers of his words and movements reported.

At last, though, he bent his baughty head more frequently over the golden curls and innocent, pretty face of the heiress, Violet Vassar.

Why this should be, when she was so rich and he was worth millions, the poor *Demoiselles* could not comprehend, for there were many faces as fair, many forms as perfectly molded among the girls that had no fortunes as was the face and form of Violet Vassar, and he certainly could not be drawn toward her by her money.

Still she became his lady-love, that was certain, and in a wonderfully short time it was arranged that they were to be married.

But then the Don was compelled to return to Mexico, he said, to look after his vast ranches and herds there, and he wished to carry back with him his bride.

The young girl had no parents living, was not particularly in love with her guardian and his family, and was glad to leave; so an early day was set for the marriage.

A grand entertainment was offered on the eve of the wedding-day, by an admiring friend of the Don, and it was a most gala occasion.

But in the midst of the festivities, a liveried servant brought a sealed note, and handed it to the Don.

He started, as his eyes fell upon the writing, and breaking the seal, walked to an antechamber before he read its contents.

What he read caused his hand to tremble violently, for his face could not grow livid beneath the dark dye on the skin.

And what he read was as follows:

"Mark Mortimer, alias Don Marco Mortemas, I have watched your career ever since you sailed upon the packet-ship London Queen, and deserted her off the Delta."

"As the intended murderer of your sister I know you, as a pirate officer with Forrester the Freebooter I know you, as a smuggler, and now you appear as an impostor, trying to deceive a young and innocent girl into marrying you, when your wife, Bessie Gito Mortimer, is living."

"A vessel sails to-morrow night for Mexico; and unless you take passage on her, you will be arrested and tried for all the crimes you have committed."

"Lie hidden until the vessel sails, and then go, or suffer the consequences."

"Let my writing tell you who pens these lines."

There was no signature to the note, but the guilty man needed not that to tell him who the writer was.

Choking back his emotion and dread, he passed through the gay assemblage, towing right and left to his admirers, and told his host he had been suddenly called to the hotel to meet a friend who had just arrived from Mexico.

And to the hotel he went, hastily packed up the traps he wished to carry with him, and then sprung into a carriage and drove rapidly to Pietro's.

"Curse the fete, and you too, Pietro."

"Ah! has something gone wrong?"

"Read that note."

The Italian did read the note, and he stood dumfounded with dread and amazement.

"What am I to do?"

"Depart."

"I know not what to do, Pietro," said the hunted man, in a tone of utter dejection.

"Hold on, I have it!"

"What?"

"Do you mind becoming a sailor of fortune?"
 "How mean you?"
 "Turning buccaneer."
 "No, I am reckless of what I do."
 "Then I'll tell you what to do."
 "I am all attention."
 "I have a dear friend who sails to-morrow night in a schooner he intends to turn into a pirate craft."

"Well?"
 "He is a fine fellow, will have a fleet craft, well armed and manned, but is short of officers, and I offer you the post of First Luff."

"I'll take it!"
 "Who is he?"
 "His name is Forrester!"
 "Ha! that man? But never mind, for were his name Satan I would go with him."

"Come, take me to him."
 And while Pietro, Mark Mortimer and Forrester the Freebooter were plotting mischief, poor Violet Vassar, in the quiet of her room, and upon what had been the eve of the day appointed for her marriage, was reading the following note:

"LADY:—
 "I am sorry to give you pain; but better that I cause you sorrow now, which in time will heal, than allow you to take a false step that will cloud your entire life.
 "It is of the man you expected to marry that I will speak, for I would tell you frankly that he is an impostor, going under an assumed name, and with no money but such as he has made by smuggling and piracy.
 "He seeks your fortune by pretending to make you his wife, when he has a wife now living.
 "To-night I write to him to depart forever from this land, or take the consequences, and the fact that he flies at once, will be proof of the truth of this letter.
 "Let the world think that you set him adrift, and that he departed because discarded by you, and none need know but yourself, the impostor, and the writer of this, the real cause, and that you came so near sacrificing yourself forever."

CHAPTER XLII. THE PADRE'S LUGGER.

It was the very night set for the marriage of the supposed Mexican millionaire and Violet Vassar.

The new moon was almost beneath the horizon, and its silvery light mingled with the twilight, shedding a soft halo over the river and the city.

The lights glimmered along the levee, and shone from many a lordly home and humble mansion, and the scene was one to look upon and enjoy.

And so thought a young officer as he paced the deck of the Lioness which lay at anchor just above the city.

He had thrown away his cigar in the enjoyment of the scene, and seemed, in common with the seamen forward, to feel the influence of the hour.

It was neither night or day, and the vessels in the harbor, the other shore, and objects on land were still plainly visible.

The officer was in a mood of disappointment too, for he had had an invitation to what was called the "Millionaire Wedding."

But the night before at the entertainment it had been whispered about that Violet Vassar and her lover had broken off.

Then the news came in the morning stating that the Don had left hurriedly for Mexico, and the affair at once settled down as gossip to be a "nine days' wonder."

The young lieutenant had expected a happy evening, and instead he was on duty aboard ship, for Violet Vassar had sent word to her friends, that the engagement with the Don was broken off forever.

Suddenly a lugger coming down the river attracted the attention of the young officer.

It was an ugly craft, awkward, and evidently belonged to some of the up-river cotton plantations, for there were bales of cotton visible upon her decks.

Her crew seemed greatly excited, and the officer noticed that her bows were stove in, as from a collision.

Anchors she had none, and she was coming almost directly down upon the Lioness, and seemed to mind her helm badly.

Suddenly a form rushed forward, and the young officer saw that it was a priest, dressed in the long robe and hat turned up upon either side, of the padres of that day in the South.

He gesticulated wildly, and shouted out:

"Ho the ship! Ho the captain!"

"Ay, ay, sir," calmly called back the lieutenant.

"We were run into up the river and our anchors were torn away, so please throw us a line and let us swing to you until morning."

The lieutenant could not refuse the request, for did the lugger go on down the stream, she would dash into a score of vessels at anchor.

So he called out:

"Ay ay, padre!"

Then turning to his men he ordered them to stand ready to catch a line.

The Lioness lay with her bows up the stream, and the rope was thrown by one of the lugger's

men and skillfully caught by the crew of the cruiser.

Running back with the line they made it fast, and the lugger swept by, rounded to under the pull, and then lay about a length astern of the cruiser.

"Bless you, my son, bless you."
 "If I may come on board I will give my blessing to your craft," called out the padre.

The officer could not refuse, and ordering the crew to seize the line and haul in, the lugger was drawn up to where the padre could get on board.

He proved to be a jolly fellow, sent on board the lugger for some old Spanish wine he had there, and told the officers amusing stories until late into the night.

Then he started to return to his vessel, which was drawn alongside, as he said he was a little unsteady in his gait, and did not wish to go into the river.

And then, as if by magic, over the sides, upon the schooner's deck, sprung man after man, armed to the teeth, while the supposed padre, throwing off his robe and seizing a cutlass, shouted in ringing tones:

"Ho, lads, cut down all who resist, and those who cry quarter fetch on board the lugger!"

Taken wholly by surprise, with two-thirds of the small crew on board in their hammocks below decks, it was but a few minutes before the Lioness was taken.

There was some short, sharp fighting; but it quickly ended, sail was spread, the cable slipped, and down the river flew the Lioness, leaving the lugger drifting astern with the former crew of the cruiser.

Wending her way skillfully through the vessels at anchor, the Lioness held on, creating the wildest excitement, for none dared attempt to check her course, for they had heard the ringing cry:

"Now, lads, Forrester the Freebooter is afloat once more!"

A wild cheer greeted his words, and then on sped the fleet craft into the gloom of the river below, leaving a scene of terror behind her.

CHAPTER XLIII. THE DOOM.

THE evening after his letters to Mark Mortimer, as Don Marco, and to Violet Vassar, Percy Wyndham set sail for home.

He seemed to get away very hurriedly, and he carried with him quite a large crew on deck, besides a number of men in the cabin, whose presence on board he did not seem to care to have known.

The cause of his leaving so suddenly was a letter he received at his hotel.

It read:

"SEÑOR WYNDHAM:—
 "I have reason to know that Forrester, the Freebooter, aided by the foe you thwarted last night, will sail for your home of Lakelands."

"Their vessel will be armed and well-manned, and their purpose is revenge."

"You will be a victim of the freebooter's and his lieutenant's hate. Your guest, Lieutenant Langdon, will be another object of their cruel attention. Miss Mortimer is to become the bride of Forrester, and Captain Bessie is to be left to starve upon an island of the Bahamas."

"The attack will be made within a week, and at night."

"Need I say more?"

FELICE."

This letter Percy Wyndham promptly acted upon, and he crowded the bows of the Jack-o'-lantern under water in rushing her homeward.

Once the anchor was dropped, half of the men were at once landed, and going up to the mansion, Percy sent Toby to organize the best of the negro men on the place into a company, arming them thoroughly, while Caleb was sent up the coast to the fishing village to collect those hardy fellows to lend a hand for a week's work and good pay.

Binnacle Ben and Bessie Gito were also called into council, with Raoul Langdon, and the result was that Captain Bessie suddenly confessed that she had been secretly organizing a crew to again become a pirate huntress, and her force, which was at Mobile, the Jack-o'-lantern was at once dispatched to bring to Lakelands.

The second night after his return, Percy had all in readiness to meet his foes.

The points of land that formed the harbor had two-score of men concealed in the thicket that grew upon them, and each party had a boat that could be at once launched.

The boat-house concealed another score of brave men, the coast fishermen, and the hedges of the Lakelands grounds were hiding places for over a hundred well-armed slaves from The Everglades and the Wyndham plantation.

Of the slaves, Uncle Toby, Caleb and Binnacle Ben took command, and of those in the boat-house Percy Wyndham had charge, while Raoul Langdon, who had about recovered from his burns, and Captain Bessie, who would not consent to be left out of the fight, commanded the parties on the wooded points of land.

At the mansion Mrs. Wyndham and Mabel had all prepared to aid the wounded, and the neighborhood physician was let into the secret, and was kept constantly on hand.

There was one thing that troubled Percy

Wyndham greatly, and that was the fact that Mark Mortimer was an officer with the pirates.

But he hoped that he might escape capture, as he would not be recognized, with his beard, even by Bessie's keen eyes.

The fourth night rolled round dark and stormy, and just before sunset a sail had been sighted, which Percy Wyndham turned his glass upon from the cupola of the mansion and pronounced to be the Lioness.

Then all nerved themselves for the work in hand, and soon the craft came flying into the harbor, the men at their guns, and all ready for action.

Luffing up, she dropped anchor near the Jack-o'-lantern, which lay silent and deserted upon the waters.

Her boats were lowered, six in number, and pulled for the shore, not to the water stairs.

Just as they were beached upon the sand, a ringing voice was heard:

"Fire!"

A volley of musketry from the boat-house was turned upon the pirates, and well aimed, for groans and cries followed.

Then, out from the two points shot the boats, containing Raoul Langdon and Captain Bessie and their men, and straight for the schooner they went, while down from the gardens came Binnacle Ben and Caleb with their black soldiers, and the pirates were hemmed in on all sides.

But they fought well, some making a stand on shore, and Forrester and half his force, springing into their boats to regain the schooner.

But here Captain Bessie and Raoul Langdon were ahead of them, and yet the pirates attempted to board.

"This time there shall be no mistake, Forrester the Freebooter."

"See! I avenge my sister!"

It was Raoul Langdon who uttered the words, and shortening his sword, by grasping it in the middle, he sprung upon the pirate chief, and drove the sharp blade again and again into his heart.

Without a groan even, Forrester the Freebooter fell dead, just as a tall bearded man sprung to his side as though to aid him.

"And I avenge my father, and myself, Mark Mortimer," came the hissing words as Captain Bessie fired a pistol full in the face of the man, for she had recognized her foe, Percy Wyndham having told her that he had not before been killed and of his evil life since, and that he had let his beard grow to disguise himself.

"Oh God! Bessie, I die by your hand," he gasped, and he sunk by the side of his chief.

With their leaders dead, and beaten at all points, the pirates cried for mercy, and Percy Wyndham boarded the schooner with the cry:

"Hold! the fight is ended!"

"Strike down no man who begs for mercy!"

"Percy, see there!"

It was Bessie who spoke, and she pointed to the bodies of Forrester the Freebooter, and Mark Mortimer.

"Both dead! thank God!"

"Yes, Raoul avenged his sister, and my revenge is complete, for he is dead, and I can now become the wife of the man I love."

"Bessie, for his sister's sake, I will say that Mark Mortimer was a prisoner on board the pirate craft, and was killed in the action, and it will be a consolation for her to let his body rest in the family burying-ground."

"Yes, for your sake, and for her, it is best," was the answer.

CHAPTER XLIV. CONCLUSION.

KIND reader; ere my pen writes farewell to the characters of my romance, let me say that the Corsair Planter, who died a pirate, had his secret so well kept that he was buried in honor by the side of his ancestors, and thus left not a Corsair's name in history.

Forrester the Freebooter was loaded in chains and sunk over the bows of the Lioness in deep water, on her way to New Orleans under command of Raoul Langdon, who resigned from the navy, married Captain Bessie, and they went to the old homestead of her husband in Maine to dwell.

Violet Vassar made a brilliant match, and when Mabel Mortimer, letting the past be buried in oblivion, became the wife of Percy Wyndham, the heiress, so nearly dishonored by an alliance with the "Mexican millionaire," bought The Everglades, and their descendants still own the old home.

Of Felice I can only say that Pietro, after the one good act of his life, in warning Percy Wyndham of the Pirates' raid, fell dead one day in the presence of his daughter.

She inherited his vast fortune, not knowing how it was gained, and with no knowledge of the world gave it to the church, and entered a convent to become a nun.

And at Lakelands the dark secret of who it was that killed Major Mark Mortimer in the duel at Magnolia Arbor, was still kept, though Mrs. Wyndham confessed it to Mabel that she had fired the fatal shot, and that her husband's hand was not red with the blood of her father.

THE END.

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